

JUST FRIENDS

A NEVER JUST FRIENDS NOVEL

SAXON JAMES

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To 2020.
You forgot the lube.

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PROLOGUE
Roo

Five Years Ago

Tanner whistles to the radio as he turns his truck into our school's parking lot. His face is golden, like sunshine, and he radiates the warmth to match. He's the kind of person who's so fundamentally optimistic, I swear nothing can dint his armor.

But with the conversation I've been stewing over all night, I'm sure as hell going to put it to the test.

"You didn't come over last night," he says. "Were you feeling okay?"

No. I swear I'm never okay these days. The seizures have ramped up to the point where I'm struggling to keep fighting this horrible darkness that's edging in. For Tanner and my parents' sake, I act like they barely faze me, but *fuck*, I'm exhausted.

And the solution Mom came up with ...

Epilepsy surgery is always a last resort. And I'm very worried we've reached that point.

"Actually, it was kind of a big night."

He pulls smoothly into a parking space and turns to look at me. "Everything okay, Roo?"

Normally his nickname for me makes me smile. When my parents and I moved here from Australia to be closer to Dad's family, I'd had a thick Australian accent, which Tanner found hilarious, so instead of *Royce* I became *Roo*. He doesn't let anyone else call me that. But now it reminds me of the conversation last night, and my heart grows heavy.

“Umm ... maybe not.” I swallow the lump in my throat, determined to get through this without crying. “Mom wants to move back to Australia.”

The light in my best friend’s face immediately dims. “W-what?”

I can’t meet his eyes.

“But ... you’re almost eighteen. You could stay if you wanted to. We’ve always talked about getting a place together and ...”

It’s like he’s run out of words. They never were his strong suit.

I look up, and he finally seems to get it. “They’re moving back for you, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Mom went on about wanting to see her family and a whole bunch of other stuff, but what it comes down to is that it’ll be way cheaper for the surgery, and she’s already been talking to this specialist who’s apparently one of the best in the world—”

I clamp my mouth shut because I’m rambling and don’t want to tell him the other reason. The real reason I didn’t make it to his house last night, when I normally sneak over there every chance I get.

Mom’s concerned. Not only about the seizures, but about how reliant I am on him. *Codependent*, she calls us. And maybe she’s right, because the sheer panic that hit me over moving was directly related to leaving him.

I didn’t give two fucks about leaving Sunbury—I hate it here. But Tanner ... It’s painful to think about.

“One of the best? Good. Yeah.” When his brown eyes meet mine, they’re so full of ... well, something that always knocks my heart off-balance. “When do you leave?”

That’s the fun part. The part that really sent me into a spin. With me seizing out every other day, they want the surgery to happen as soon as possible. “Right after graduation.”

“*Two weeks?*” His voice hitches with the same panic I’ve been feeling, and just when I think he’s going to start demanding that I stay, when I think he’s going to tell me we’ll sort something out, here, in America, he takes a breath ... and nods instead. “Good.”

Good?

My heart sinks through my gut.

I’ve spent the last twelve hours physically sick at the thought of leaving, and he’s arrived at *good*.

Mom was wrong. There’s nothing codependent happening here. Nope. Just dependent.

And as much as I hate to agree with her, Tanner’s eighteen. He *shouldn’t* be responsible for looking after me when I can’t do it myself. Maybe we really do need time apart.

I lick my suddenly dry lips. “Yeah, good.”

He pats my thigh and throws open the door to his truck, optimism firmly back in place. “Come on or we’ll be late for class.”

I can barely bring myself to move. Who the fuck cares about class?

He didn’t ask how long I’d be gone for.

He didn’t demand to come.

He didn’t react the way I’d been expecting *at all*, and now all I can think as he walks me to class is, *How did I misjudge our friendship so badly?*

At the classroom door, he gives me the usual side hug and kiss on the head, reminding me to text him if I start feeling off. Then he walks away, apparently completely unaffected that seven years of friendship are about to come to an end.



CHAPTER ONE
TANNER

The day my best friend moved back to Australia was one of the hardest I've ever lived through, but today takes a close second.

I feel sick as I arrive on the first floor of the firehouse, making my way toward the chief's office. I know exactly how this conversation is gonna go. I flunked the test. Again.

I don't know why I keep trying when I'm never gonna pass and become a qualified firefighter. Dyslexia is a bitch.

And these thoughts aren't gonna get me anywhere. My carefree smile is well practiced to hide how I'm really feeling, and it slips onto my face easily when I knock on the office door and the chief calls for me to enter.

We exchange pleasantries as I take a seat, but my gut is in my damn throat, and I kinda wish we could skip this whole conversation so I can go home and call Roo. Everything feels better when I'm talking to him.

"Tanner, I ..." Chief Lawson trails off, rubbing a meaty hand over his mouth. "You're one of our best volunteers, but when I place a test in front of you ... Is there something going on?"

"No, sir." Nothing specific. Nothing worth mentioning.

"You didn't even score fifty percent. I think your results were *worse* than last time."

My jaw flexes on instinct, but I keep quiet. I lived through being the dumbass who can't read in high

school. I'm not prepared to go through it here.

Stale silence creeps slowly through the room.

"I'm sorry," he says. The word is heavy with finality. "I should have the budget for another full-time firefighter in six months. Until then, you need to study. You need to work out whatever is going on with you." He tosses the test toward me with a growl. "You *know* this stuff."

I don't make a move to pick up the paper. "Thank you for taking the time to see me in person." And while I'm grateful, my words are empty. Just like my head. I'm starting to think it's time I faced the fact that I'm on the wrong path. I drag my hands back over my short hair. "Can I go?"

Chief grimaces, shifting his bulk in his chair, his black eyes watching me intently. "Yes. Reach out if you need me, though, won't you?"

"Of course." Of course *not*.

I hold it together until I make it out of the office, down the hall, and into the locker room. Frustration prickles at my eyes, but I clench my jaw and push it all back. Tears don't help anyone.

And once I acknowledge that, my shoulders slump as the anger rushes out of me, leaving my muscles heavy with exhaustion. The last thing I needed on the back of a twelve-hour night shift was to be told I'd failed my assessment test on the job I wanted more than anything.

More than my dream of the Olympics in high school.

More than buying my own place a little outside of town.

More than ... Well, *not* more than my best friend coming home. So maybe not more than anything, but it's definitely right up there.

All I've ever wanted was to make a good name for myself in Sunbury, so when people say Tanner Everett, it makes them smile. It makes them think of a good person,

a *reliable* person who has his shit together. This job was all part of that plan.

And maybe that's not what most people want out of life, but I like simple.

Yet even after five years of proving myself, I'm still floundering.

I grab my stuff and make my way out of the station, trying to act gracious to Pauly and Jones when they tell me, "Maybe next time."

Which they're right in saying, but there's a massive stress on the *maybe* part of that sentence. Like *maybe* one day reading and writing *won't* be the bane of my existence.

It's the usual brisk December morning, but the chill doesn't touch me as I make my way to my car. At least I can be grateful that as a volunteer, I don't have to work full shifts, and sure, I'm not getting paid, but it gives me a level of freedom the other guys don't have.

Things could be worse.

I keep reminding myself of that the whole way home. It's done now. Stewing over it isn't going to change anything, but it's really hard to shift that anxiousness gripping me.

Chief's right. I did worse than the first time I took that stupid test. If I was smart, I'd use the next six months to take things seriously. I already know what my problem is; I've been dealing with it since before I can remember. The thing is, there's no *fix*. It's all a constant battle, and to make myself feel better, I do what I do best: I play dumb and hope the problem goes away.

I make it into my apartment and dump my work bag by the door. It's been a while since I was down on myself, and I don't plan on starting with the mopey shit now. Instead, I pick up my phone, check the time in Sydney, and then click on Roo's number. Early morning here means late night there.

Like always, my best friend answers within a few rings.

“Tanner!” His deep voice immediately makes me smile. “Did you get your results? How were they?”

I force a laugh. “I did, and not good.”

“Not good because you were hoping to do better, or not good because you didn’t apply for the assistance *you specifically told me you had?*”

“We’re not doing this again,” I say, trying to sound like I’m teasing.

“Incorrect. We’ll do this until you start listening to me.”

I sigh. “Roo, can we not? Please?”

For a moment I worry he’s in one of his argumentative moods, but to my relief, he lets it go. “You on your way home?”

“Already here. Thought I’d give you an update before I jump in the shower.”

“Well, I’m sorry it didn’t go your way. Next time?”

Next time. Do I really want to go through that again? I dunno. “Yeah, next time.”

Roo starts to laugh. “It’s hilarious that after all these years you still try and lie to me.”

The familiarity makes me warm inside. There’s nothing on earth like talking to the one person who knows what’s happening in your head even better than you do. “Fine. I’m a bit confused. I think the result is too fresh. I need a bit of space, and then I’ll be ready to go again.”

He hums. “I’ll never get tired of your endless optimism.”

I settle back on my couch, not bothering to turn the lights on. Heavy clouds are blocking the weak morning sun, making my living room sufficiently moody. “Eh, no point getting down about things you can’t change.”

“Nothing is outside your control, Tanner.”

I laugh. “That’s because you think I can do anything.”

“Yeah, I do.”

That lightness settles over me again. “You’ve always thought too much of me.”

“And *you’ve* never given yourself enough credit.”

And that’s the thing about Roo. Ever since we met, as scrawny little eleven-year-olds, he’s always been fiercely on my side. It’s ridiculous how blind he is to all my faults, but I’m the same with him. “Did I tell you Jules is moving out?”

“What? No. When did that happen?”

“She gave me the heads-up two weeks ago. Still another two weeks before her house is ready, but we always knew this wasn’t a long-term thing.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “So you’re looking for a housemate again?”

“Guess so.” I groan. “It’s gonna be such a pain in the ass, because there’s so many people looking for a roommate in Nowhere, Oregon.”

“Umm ...” There’s a pause. “I, ah, maybe I know of someone.”

That gets my attention. “Oh yeah, who?” Who the heck does he talk to around here that I don’t?

“The guy’s a bit messy.”

I cringe. “How messy?”

“Messy enough to drive you mad. And he wants to get a cat.”

“Messy *and* a cat? I dunno ...”

“Are you *really* in a position to be picky?”

I bite off my objection. I don’t *need* a roommate. My two-bedroom apartment isn’t exactly expensive. But the more I pay for this place, the less I can put away for the

down payment on my own house. “Okay ... Messy and a cat. What else? Will he watch me while I sleep? Because that could be the hat trick.”

“You used to love it when I watched you sleep,” he teases.

“No, I used to put up with it. Because you take forever to drift off.”

“He’ll probably watch you sleep, if I’m honest. He wakes up late too.”

I groan. “It almost sounds like you’re describing yourself.”

“Well, he sounds like me.”

“That so?”

“And he *does* look like me.”

Something in his tone makes me sit up, suddenly on edge. “Wait, are you ... Roo, are you coming *home*?” My voice breaks, and the excitement that fills my stomach is near sickening. If I’m wrong, *this* will be the most disappointing part of my day, and it’s barely seven a.m.

His laugh is so soft, I almost miss it. “I love that you still call it home.”

“Because it *is* home.” My heart is smashing against my ribs. “*Are* you?”

He doesn’t answer.

“*Roo?*”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m here.” He takes a deep breath. “I think ... Well, why not?”

“What does that mean?”

“That I might. The surgery’s well and truly done, uni’s over, and I’m back from my trip around Europe. I ... I always imagined I’d be back to visit one day.”

Holy shit. I feel light-headed. “This better not be one of your jokes.”

“Promise.” His voice goes scratchy. “I’ve missed you too.”

Missed you doesn’t even cover it, though. All through middle school and high school, Roo and I were inseparable. Classes through the day, sleepovers almost every night. He’d force himself out of bed early to come and time my swim practices, and when he got a part-time job at the only fast-food place in town, I went and signed up as well.

We had other friends, but nothing came close to our friendship.

And then his seizures ramped up senior year, and suddenly his parents were talking about moving back to Australia for surgery, and in the space of two weeks I went from seeing him every day to not at all. It killed me. And for his sake, I had to pretend it didn’t.

“When?” I finally ask.

“Soon,” he promises.

Soon.

I feel completely wrong-footed. It’s been five long years of jumping between knowing everything about each other, to months of no communication. I can’t even imagine him being here, slotting back into my life like he never left.

And then there’s a worse option: what if he doesn’t fit into my life at all?

I’m nervous as hell.

Because as much as I want Roo back here, I don’t know what to expect.



CHAPTER TWO
Roo

The flight to San Francisco took forever, and the connecting flight to Portland seemed to take even longer. Tanner wanted to pick me up from the airport, but my aunt insisted on me stopping by to see the family for the weekend. She still doesn't forgive Dad for moving back to Australia, but when your parents are from different countries, that shit takes compromise.

I take a bus and leave Portland late Sunday afternoon, which gets me into Sunbury after nightfall.

As I leave the dense forest behind and start to see the first signs of civilization in the past few miles, I'm hit with an overwhelming surge of nostalgia. I swallow past the lump in my throat as I remember the last time I looked out on these farms, during our drive out of town when we were headed to the other side of the world. I'd been just as tired and weary and nervous and uncertain then.

Now ... I puff out a breath as I look up at the familiar mountain range overshadowing Sunbury and housing the state-famous Crown Trails. This whole place is one giant reminder of Tanner, soured by the lingering memory of how people used to treat me as the *epileptic kid*.

I pass through a residential stretch, and I'm tempted to ask if I can get off here and walk past my old house, but the anxiousness at my reunion with Tanner keeps me heading for O'Connell Road.

The jet lag is kicking my ass. The streets are familiar, the memories strong, but everything has a weird hazy

edge to it, and my body is begging for sleep. I already regret agreeing to meet Tanner at the bar.

I'm the last person aboard the bus, and the driver is nice enough to pull up in the bar parking lot. It's one of the only places in town that isn't full of memories. I left Sunbury when I was eighteen, so I wasn't legal then. Well, I wasn't legal *here*. Once I got to Australia and recovered from my operation, I took full advantage of the lower drinking age, totally disregarding my doctor's recommendations.

I thank the driver as he closes the doors and pulls away, and for a moment, I stand there with my suitcase and stare up at the glowing red sign. It still doesn't feel real to be back here, and I can't believe that in a few moments I'm going to see Tanner again for the first time in years. Things have changed so much since I was last here. So much that looking around at Sunbury makes me wonder if I can really stick it out for the few months I'd planned.

I'm pretty sure the answer is no.

I hated this place growing up. It was like being in a fishbowl. People always gossiping and giving me the side-eye like they thought I might seize out at any moment. Which is sort of accurate, but not a great way to be treated when you're a teenager and everything already feels like shit.

And yet here I am, running back to Tanner, like we're still the same codependent dickheads we were in high school. Except this time, I haven't sneaked out through my window and walked a couple of streets over. This time I've flown across continents for someone I don't even know anymore.

The winter chill makes me shiver, and I wrap an arm around myself while I run a hand over my short beard. If I know Tanner, he's going to expect me to be the same scrawny kid he had to protect in high school. He's going to want everything to revert back to exactly how it was five years ago.

But how do I go back to Tanner being my entire world, when I'm keeping two pretty huge things from him?

He used to know me better than anyone.

But he doesn't know I'm gay.

And he doesn't know I'm completely in love with him.

In high school, I went through all the usual teen angst. I'd catalogue the nights we shared a bed, or how he'd strip down in front of me in the locker room, or pull me into his lap when there were no free chairs left. Then I'd go home and jerk off relentlessly over every single moment. I *lived* for the angst. For all the touches that drove me crazy. For the glimpses of his firm, round ass.

Tanner's always been Mr. Sunbury, the golden child of the town, and it added to his allure. For a lost shithead like me, seeing someone so put together drove my poor baby gay heart wild.

It wasn't until I flew back to Australia and learned that my dick was good for more than jerking off over my best friend that I lost my virginity. But I've never been able to commit to a relationship because everything comes back to Tanner.

So now I'm here.

To finally tell him.

And no, I'm not a naive idiot who thinks he'll miraculously fall in love with me, because while I discovered men outside of Tanner, he discovered women. But for some reason my dumb ass needs to hear the words come out of his mouth.

Okay, let's get this shitshow on the road.

I make my way toward the Ugly Mug, just waiting for someone to jump out and card me. It doesn't happen, and I have to remind myself that I'm a grown as fuck man now. I wouldn't be surprised if Tanner doesn't even recognize me. I'm not someone who plasters photos of himself all over social media, and we rarely video-call.

It doesn't help that over the last five years I've purposely tried to pull away. There were months where we didn't talk, but it always ended the same—with a weak moment, and me calling him and falling for him all over again.

I pull open the door and take in the pseudofamiliar scenery. A bar is a bar no matter where you are in the world. Booths on one side, a bar across the front, pool tables in the back. It's not until I blink away my funk and concentrate on what I'm seeing that I realize it's not only Tanner I'm meeting here.

Ah, shit.

One booth is packed with people, and as I take in the *Welcome Home* banner and balloons, I know exactly who they're all waiting for.

"Royce, over here!" Jules stands up, waving madly, and I laugh at how she hasn't changed *at all*. She's still got a swishy blonde ponytail, vibrant smile, and too big attitude for her tiny body.

"What the hell is all this?"

Laura and Rafe, Leon, Circus, and Dahlia. The whole gang is here, and that's ... weird. I knew from talking to Tanner that no one but me had moved on, but knowing that and actually seeing them like this, captured in time like I've missed a week instead of *five years*, is way too surreal for my tired brain.

"Your homecoming!" Jules says through her perpetual smile, stretching her arms wide.

One by one they get out of the booth to hug me or pat my back, and I notice tiny differences—Laura's pixie cut, Leon's already graying hair, Circus's septum piercing—but if I'm completely honest, none of them hold my attention.

I manage a polite smile and accept their surprise at how different I look, and questions about Australia, but I'm basically vibrating out of my skin, wondering where the hell Tanner is.

And then I hear it.

“Roo?”

Nerves explode deep in my gut. There’s only one person who calls me that. My shoulders draw up tight at the familiar voice, and I steel myself to turn, prepared to face a stranger.

But the man in front of me hasn’t changed.

He’s still my Tanner.

And yes, he’s taller and wider and his swimmer’s build has been replaced by one that could tear other men apart. His blond hair is buzzed short. But his brown eyes are still sweet, his chin is still scarred, and he still looks at me like I’m the most important person in the room.

“Tanner.” Dear God, I’m not going to cry. I try to swallow back the emotion, but it gets lodged in my throat, and before I can get another word out, he closes the distance between us and swamps me in a hug.

And as I melt into his touch and feel his hand run through my hair and his lips kiss my ear, he murmurs over and over how much he’s missed me. I finally acknowledge I am well and truly fucked.

The last time we saw each other, I’d been sobbing my heart out over leaving, and he’d just hugged me and told me it was for the best.

I couldn’t disagree more.

In Tanner’s arms is a place I’ve been countless times before, and like every other time, I close my eyes and commit the moment to memory. I wait for him to let go first, then quickly step back like I don’t want to plaster myself against him permanently.

He lets out an awkward laugh and swipes at his eyes. “Wow. Hey, so ...” His smile lights up his face. “You’re back.”

For now. “I guess so.” And I want to stop looking at him, because that’s the normal thing to do, but just try and tell my eyes to look away.

I'm suddenly painfully aware that leaving him again will be near impossible. I'd have more chance trying to get him to leave with me.

Which actually isn't a terrible idea ...

"Okay, I'm buying," Circus says in that dry rasp of his, snapping me out of the moment. He pulls his wallet out of his pocket and taps my shoulder with his free hand. "Beer okay?"

"Yeah, sounds good." I'm not sure I'll be able to keep it down anyway. This whole thing feels ... right. Which is completely freaking me out.

Fingers close over my wrist, and Tanner tugs me to the table. He slides into the booth far enough for me to take the seat next to him, and the dark red leather groans as I sit.

"This is new," Tanner teases, brushing his thumb over my cheek.

"Pretty sure my face has always been there."

"Yeah, I know. I've never been able to get it to shut up." His shoulder nudges mine. "I meant the beard."

I'd grown the beard so I didn't look so baby-faced. "And *you* cut your hair. It's amazing what you can manage in five years."

"Couldn't manage to fix that dry humor, though, could you?"

I snigger, turning my whole body toward him and propping my chin on my hand. "Why fix what's already perfect?"

His eyes are bright with amusement as they trace my features, and it's moments like this when I can almost believe I have a chance with him.

"Jesus Christ, you two." Dahlia snorts and flicks a coaster toward me that I barely manage to deflect. It flops into a water ring. "Are nonconjoined-conjoined twins a thing?"

“Surely a petition could make that happen,” I deadpan.

But now that I’ve torn my attention away from Tanner, I’m privy to the bemused smiles everyone is throwing our way.

“They can’t be *twins*,” Leon explains. “Twins are related, and that would be creepy with how in love they are.”

Tanner laughs. “Already?”

But while he might find the old joke amusing, I can’t bring myself to laugh. Not anymore.

Luckily, Circus gets back before I have to say anything, and sets two trays of beers down. “Everyone ready to toast?” He grabs one of the glasses and holds it up. “To Royce. Thank you for finally coming back and balancing out the group again. You know how I feel about odd numbers.”

“For heaven’s sake, sit down,” Jules huffs. “Now for a *real* toast. Royce, the last five years have sucked without you here, for some of us more than others ...” Her blue eyes flick toward Tanner. “But now that you’re here, it’ll be like you never left. And I know I speak for all of us when I say I’m glad you’re back. To Royce.”

“To Royce.”

I don’t have the heart to point out this is only temporary.

Everyone knocks their glasses together and drinks, but Tanner hesitates, beer at his lips. “Here’s to feeling whole again.”

My attention snaps to him. He’s watching me, and he looks so sweet and naive, I want to wrap him in Bubble Wrap to stop the world from getting through. It must be the only reason I answer, “To being whole.”

Because the irony is, while everything seems better with him beside me, I can already feel myself starting to break.

CHAPTER THREE
TANNER

I need to get out of here. I need to finish my beer, and take Roo, and head home, and convince myself this is fucking real.

My best fucking friend.

I've always been dumb—the *intellectually challenged* kind—but I'm being slower than normal tonight. And while Roo jokes around with our friends and fills us in on Australia and the places he's traveled to, I keep sneaking glances at him, checking he hasn't disappeared.

And I can't stop smiling. Not for a minute.

He's so different. There's the deep voice I already knew about, but the short beard, the way he's filled out a little, his longer brown hair, and how he seems a little nervous around me ... So different.

Things have always been easy, but tonight he feels hesitant, almost like I'm an old acquaintance instead of the closest person in the world to him. I reassure myself that as soon as we get out of here, we'll be able to talk properly. To fall into our old comfort with each other and discuss any little thing on our minds. Because maybe he's feeling uncomfortable being so close and familiar around our friends, but I know he won't hold back when we're alone.

He lets out a wide yawn he tries unsuccessfully to stifle behind his hand. That's my cue.

"We're going to head out, guys." I nudge Roo with my knee so he gets the message, and I collect his balloons from the middle of the table as I slide out after

him. The bar is kinda loud for a Sunday, so thank God I'm not working security tonight, or I'd be stuck in this place for another few hours. "Late shift here last night. I'm beat."

"Are you staying or going, Royce?" Leon asks.

"Going. Tanner's my ride, and I'm still pretty jet-lagged." He looks it. Even under the complete map of freckles, which covers his entire body, the dark circles below his hazel eyes stand out.

"We'll call you to meet up this week," Laura says, speaking for Rafe like always. Roo agrees, and once the others wind up their goodbyes, we finally escape.

"Fuck, it's cold as balls out here," Roo complains when we step outside. My automatic reaction is to wrap my arm around him and pull him close—it's what I would have done before he left—but I suddenly don't know how to act. Instead, I watch while he cups his freckled hands to his mouth and breathes into them. "Where's your car?"

"Just over there." I point toward my white truck. "Your aunt find the place okay?"

His stare immediately drops to the ground. "I, ah, took a bus instead."

"Roo."

"It's fine."

"I *said* I could pick you up."

His lips pull up on one side. "And I said you didn't have to. I'm a big boy now, Tanner."

His voice is dry the way it usually goes when people start to make a fuss over what he's capable of. But my concern isn't misplaced. I know his seizures have lessened since his surgery, but thinking of him having one on a bus, while he was all alone ... My protective instincts kick up a notch, and I have to work to force them back down again.

It's like I have two left hands when I try to open my truck door and stuff the balloons on the floor of the passenger seat, before starting the engine. Roo climbs in beside me. I'm thrumming with energy and the type of nerves where you feel like you've missed a step and are about to plummet to the ground. It's a weird reaction to have around Roo because everything has always been instinctive, but I guess I'll need to do a little more thinking and a little less autopilot around him for a while.

My apartment is only a few blocks away, but our ride back is so quiet, it makes it feel longer. When I pull into the small, aged parking lot, Roo throws me a weak smile and jumps out. I glance in the mirror and watch him grab his luggage from the truck bed, itching with the need to go help him. Instead, I take a deep breath, grab the balloons, and force myself to move again.

We're quiet as I lead the way to the complex, and we take the elevator to the fourth floor. He's slumped a little against the wall, and his shoulders are so droopy, I can almost feel his exhaustion.

"Want me to take that?" I ask, pointing at his large suitcase.

"Sure." He lifts the carry-on from the top, but I take that from him too. His lips quirk, and I wait for the sardonic response. It doesn't come. "Thanks."

"What are friends for?" Even to me, my words sound forced. I wish we could bypass this awkwardness and go back to being Tanner-and-Roo.

I made sure to tidy the apartment earlier, and Jules did a thorough cleanup of her old room before she left, but when I unlock the door and step aside to let him past, I'm anxious about what he'll think. It's not big-city living by any stretch of the imagination, but it's clean, and the kitchen has been recently updated.

He looks around the living room. "This is cool." Even if he's only being polite, it makes me smile.

"Yeah, I mean, it's only temporary. But I like it."

“I was expecting more of a bachelor pad.”

“Is that what you had in Sydney?”

He laughs. “I couldn’t afford to live *in* Sydney. I was way, *way* out of the city, and even then all I could afford was a tiny one-bedroom that smelled like cheese.”

“*Cheese?*”

He shrugs. “No clue why.”

I chuckle as I prop his luggage against the couch.

There’s a beat of silence before he points down the hall. “Which one is my room?”

“First on the left.” I trail after him, rubbing at the back of my neck, which is starting to heat up. “Sorry, I haven’t had a chance to grab you any furniture. I had overnights at the firehouse on Wednesday and Thursday, then worked security at the bar Friday and Saturday.”

He waves a hand in my direction as he opens the door and walks inside. “Don’t worry about tha—*wow*. This is massive. You could fit three of my bedrooms in here.”

I glance through the door. From what I can tell, the room hasn’t changed since I last saw it. “It’s standard size.”

“Maybe standard *Sunbury* size.” He rubs his eyes, then slides his hands roughly over his cheeks. “So much room for activities.”

“What kind of—” I cut off as my eyes widen. We’re in a bedroom. I *know* what kind of activities happen in a bedroom. But ... well, I guess I tend to stick to the *bed*.

He smirks, looking at me directly for the first time since we entered the apartment. “It’s an expression. Get your filthy mind out of my bedroom.”

“*You* said it,” I splutter.

“I was thinking more like yoga or tai-chi.”

“You do either of those things?”

“Well, no. But in a room this size, the possibilities are endless. I could take up meditation, learn an instrument, fuck against the wall ...”

I snort out a laugh. “Why anyone would prefer a big city is beyond me.”

“Lots more to do.”

“Ah, but without wall-fucking, is it worth the trade-off?” I cross my arms and lean into the doorframe, expecting to hear his snigger again. But Roo stays quiet and shoots me this real weird look.

He shakes his head. “So which is your room?”

Abrupt subject change, huh? I’m not sure whether to push—clearly, something’s going on with him that I don’t know about—but I figure he’s tired, and this is all pretty new, so I need to give it time.

“Down here.” My room is right at the end. The door is already open because I’m shit at remembering to close it, which used to drive Jules up the wall when I’d have someone stay over. It’s tidy-ish. The bed isn’t made, but there are no clothes on the floor, and I remembered to tuck my lube and tissues away in the drawer. Since my last girlfriend broke up with me, I haven’t had the energy to go out and find another one.

“Far out, Tanner.” He laughs. “If I could have imagined a bedroom for you, this would have been exactly it.” I watch as he crosses the space, looking as natural here as he ever did in my bedroom growing up. He drops onto the side of the bed and picks up my teddy that I only *just fucking now* realize I probably should have hidden too. “I can’t believe you still have this guy.”

“Yeah, well ...” I grunt, not knowing how to finish that sentence.

He looks up at me from under dark eyelashes, a small smile playing at his lips. “It’s cute.”

“If you tell anyone, you’re dead to me.”

“I remember,” he sings, stroking the bear’s head. “I’ve never told a soul. Best friend’s honor.”

I don't know how to respond to that. Shoving him back on the bed by his face and roughhousing was always my go-to when my brain went blank, but now that reaction seems a little strange.

"So ..." He looks around the room. "I might take a shower and pass out."

"Yeah, I figured you're tired."

"Of course you did."

Blank. Again.

"Well ..." When I hadn't had time to pick up so much as an air mattress, I'd figured it wouldn't be a problem. We've shared a bed so many times, I assumed that's what would happen. What I didn't take into account was that we're physically bigger now, and beds are still made the same size.

It's like he can read my mind. Roo jumps up quickly and drops the bear back on my bed. "I'll take the couch. Want to come shopping with me tomorrow for a few things?"

I almost tell him to screw the couch idea. To stay here and not let this be weird. "Of course. Blankets are in the hall closet. Want me to—"

"I got it. Thanks." He moves closer, making to leave the room. I shift away from the doorframe so he can pass, but he hovers right inside my personal space. Something that's never existed between us before. My body crackles with awareness of him being so close.

His hazel eyes look brown without the light shining on them, and his normally relaxed face looks as tense as the day he told me he was leaving. "I, umm ..." He takes a deep breath. "It's weird to be back."

"Yeah," I murmur. "I bet." I don't want to ask the question, but I can't stop it falling from my lips. "Are you here for good this time?" My shoulders square as I prepare myself for the answer, unable to comprehend why anyone would *want* to leave.

"I ... I told you this was only a visit."

I swallow roughly. “I’m glad you’re here anyway.”

“Me too.”

I nod jerkily, and Roo leaves.

Even having him a room away is too much right now. All I can think of is the boy I knew, the one who was everything I needed during high school. I lost him once, and I’ll do anything I can so it doesn’t happen again.

But even as I change and crawl into bed, I’m on high alert for any sign of his continued existence in my space. The shower cutting on and off, the slight squeak of the bathroom door, the groan of the floorboard when he passes the kitchen. I hear the way the leather gives when he finally settles down, the rustle as he pulls a blanket over himself.

And even though the thought has circulated through my mind a hundred times tonight, I’m still struggling to believe he’s *here*.

Roo is back.

He’s living with me.

And he’s a complete and total stranger.



CHAPTER FOUR
Roo

Hello world, welcome to my pain.

I groan as I stretch out my tight back, the ache intensifying with each push of my muscles. That. Sucked. Balls. And not in the preferred holy-crap-I'm-gonna-come type of way either. Tanner must be up, because the heat is on and the curtains that were open last night are now closed. It was surreal, staring out at the overcast night as I tried desperately to get my jet lag to cooperate so I could fall asleep, but being back here made every nerve come alive.

Sure, things were a little off last night, but even through his confusion, it was obvious very quickly that Tanner is still *my* Tanner. I huff out a laugh and kick my blankets off.

“Finally awake?”

“Jesus, *shit*.” I gasp as I sit up and find Tanner sitting on the floor next to the couch. He’s holding his phone in one hand and looking up at me with amusement. “You creep. I thought *I* was supposed to be the one watching *you* sleep.”

“What’s some creeping among friends?” He nudges my legs aside and slides up onto the couch.

“What time is it?”

“After noon.”

I groan. “I set my alarm for two hours ago.”

“I know.” His big lips quirk. “And after you ignored it for the fourth time, I decided to switch it off and let you sleep.”

“I’m jet-lagged. That’s the worst thing you can do.”

“Eh.” He doesn’t look anywhere near remorseful enough. “You need sleep, I’m gonna let you sleep.”

“You’ll learn to say no to me one day.”

His forehead wrinkles. “Why would I ever wanna do that?”

“Oh, I’m so taking advantage of that.” I laugh and nudge him with my foot. “I need coffee.”

“Done and done.” He gets up and moves around his kitchen in that practiced way that comes from living in one place for a while. I miss that.

When we got to Australia, I was with Mom and Dad for a year while I recovered from surgery and sorted things out. Then I moved into a dorm at uni, then went traveling ... I look around the room and into the kitchen beyond, wondering how temporary this place will be. It’s a bit old, but just like his room when we were teenagers, Tanner keeps the place spotless. Even if this place *is* temporary, and there’s a ninety-nine percent chance it will be, it feels like home.

“Still coming shopping with me today?”

“Of course. Anything else you want to do?”

“Nah, a bed is the main thing.”

“Still take two sugars?”

“None, actually. And I take it black, now.”

He doesn’t answer, but a moment later he rejoins me, two mugs in hand. When he sits down, I peer over into his milky mess, and it makes me smile. “I bet you still take half a cup of milk and four sugars, don’t you?”

His tan cheeks flush. “So what if I do?”

I’d find it adorable and comforting, which of course I won’t mention in a million years. “Curious.”

“What else is new?”

I turn a little so I’m leaning into the back of the couch, better able to see his face. “I eat fish now.”

“What?”

“It’s good for you or some shit.”

He laughs, and I get this little tug in my stomach. “I’ve been telling you that forever.”

“I guess I got hit with maturity in my old age.”

“Eww.” He shifts away. “It’s not contagious, is it?”

I lean closer. “Come here and find out.”

He starts to laugh and slaps a hand over my mouth. “God, did something die in there?”

Maybe it did, but how am I meant to concentrate on an appropriate comeback with the smell of Tanner’s skin filling my nose. So instead of talking, I lick his palm.

“Roo!” His hand tightens. “Have I told you that you’re the most disgusting person ever?”

I pull away. “Multiple times, thank you. I guess you can add that to your hasn’t-changed list.”

“Thank God there’s something.”

I blink. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Tanner purses his lips, leans forward, and sets his cup down. It’s still weird seeing him with hair so short, I can see his scalp at the sides. “Do you ...” He frowns at his hands, thick fingers linking and unlinking. “I know you’ve always refused to believe I’m dumb, even when the numbers are clearly there, but this weird wall between us is a total surprise.”

“Wall?”

“Yeah. It’s like ... I don’t know how to be around you anymore.”

And even after so long, we’re still on the same page. The thing is, I *was* prepared for this wall, because it’s one I carefully constructed. I’m not an idiot. I know straight guys can be affectionate too, even with their friends, and while that stupid romantic side of me continues to hope I’ll get lucky, the stronger cynical side knows exactly where this is headed. And the only thing

that will soften the blow of rejection is this *fucking wall*. “Just be you. There’s a reason we’ve been friends for so long.”

“Yeah.” But he doesn’t sound convinced. “So, that furniture isn’t going to buy itself. Wanna jump in the shower and then we’ll go?”

Do I want to leave the conversation here? Hell no. What I want is to tell Tanner everything about why this is so hard. My original plan had been to drop the gay thing on him while I was still in Australia. And yeah, I know Tanner had a traditional upbringing with very *wholesome* ideas about what a family is, but I also know that what we have is stronger than that.

I’ll tell him, and he’ll tell me everything is fine.

It’s what comes *after* that will hurt. Because even without knowing it, his parents and this community have gotten in his head, and bit by bit he’ll unconsciously pull away. I’ve seen him do it before, and it fucking hurt. I’ll never forget the night we were lying in his bed, not long before I left, and I tried feeling things out by bringing up the news of Rich Bladley coming out. And what did he say?

“That dude makes me uncomfortable as hell.”

So instead of unloading anything on him right now, I get up and shower.

“A month?” I share a look with Tanner as the salesman gives me a pitying smile.

“Without a warehouse, we can’t keep anything on hand, so it’s all ordered in.”

“And that’s the fastest you can do?”

“That would be an express order, yes.” His tone is polite, but I can sense some exasperation sneaking in.

Fair, considering it took me forty minutes to pick the damn thing.

“Fine.” I hand over my card, trying not to focus on how much sorer my back will be after sleeping on Tanner’s couch for *four weeks*. “You don’t happen to have any air mattresses, do you?”

“Ah, no.”

Figures. I do my best to hide my disappointment from Tanner as we leave and head down O’Connell Road.

“Wanna stop for a sandwich?” he asks.

I shoot him a smirk. “I swear you *just* ate.”

“*Just?* More like an hour or two ago.” He rubs his stomach. “Need more protein.”

“Protein?” I reach over and squeeze his bicep, because I’ve been *dying* to since I saw him last night. “I think you’re maxed out, my friend.”

“Like you can talk.” He jostles me. “You might actually be able to win a fight now.”

Maybe when hell freezes over. “Let’s not test that theory.”

“So ... food?”

I laugh. “Yes, quick. Before you waste away.”

It takes way longer than it should to make our way down the street. Everyone seems to be out this morning, and we keep getting stopped. Most people want to talk to Tanner, but as soon as they recognize me, the questions start. All they care about is if I’m back for good, and how the operation went, and if it stopped the seizures, and yeah, I guess it’s great people are acting like they care, but I know that’s not where the interest is coming from. Me being back is fresh new gossip, and it seems like a competition between Eric Fletcher and Ms. Rasserman for who can get the most out of me.

“Having someone play with my brain was probably my favorite moment of the last five years,” I tell Eric

dryly. He smiles like I've let him in on some big secret, while Tanner tries not to laugh.

He quickly tugs my arm. "Sorry, Eric. We've gotta get going."

"I'll see you boys around."

"Can't wait," I respond.

Tanner's hand tightens on my arm. "He's just trying to be nice."

I snort. "Since when did *nice* and *nosy* become synonyms?"

"One day people are going to pick up that you're making fun of them."

"I can only hope."

A streak of ginger darts across the path in front of us, making us pull up short.

"Was that a cat?" I ask, looking toward the alley it disappeared into.

"Yep. It's been around for a while, and I don't blame it. The amount of food people leave out, you'd think they're making offerings to a god."

"Cats are superior."

Tanner snorts. "They're a lot of work is what they are. And you're not getting one while you live with me."

I pretend to pout, but Tanner only shakes his head at me.

"This is one thing I'm putting my foot down over. And you thought I couldn't say no to you."

"We'll see."

Harvey's Burger House literally hasn't changed, and when I walk in, Piper Harvey recognizes me right away. "Oh my, Royce Williams?" She glances between me and Tanner. "He's back?"

"Looks like it." Tanner's mouth twitches into a reluctant smile.

“If I could have been a fly on the wall for that reunion.”

I hum because I guess most people would assume it would have been some huge moment, but other than a tearful hug, we’ve barely touched since. “How have you been, Piper?”

“Really good. My brother, Rowan, should be back from Portland in a few months. I swear it seems like everyone’s finally coming back home.”

“Because everyone’s graduating,” Tanner points out.

Piper gives him a sweet smile. “You want the usual?”

“Please.”

She stares at him a beat too long before turning to me. “What about you?”

“I’ll have whatever the big guy’s having.”

Her mouth presses into a line a second before she turns to put in our orders, and I lift an eyebrow. That was ... interesting. Does Piper Harvey have the hots for my guy?

Tanner pulls out a stool at the counter, so I take the one next to him. Only a handful of people are here right now, some I recognize, some I don’t, but if the last day has taught me anything, it’s that nothing here has changed. Come four o’clock, the booths will be full. Sunbury isn’t exactly a large town, but with the high school let out and the oldies grabbing their afternoon tea, the place turns into bedlam.

I try to avoid the curious stares being sent my way, and I’ll bet that ninety percent of the people here are looking at me, waiting for me to seize out. This slimy feeling oozes down my spine, and I press my lips together to stop from telling them all to fuck off.

“What are you thinking about?”

Tanner’s soft voice makes me smile before I even see his face, which of course makes me smile more. “Just ... looking.”

“Eh, it hasn’t changed much,” he mutters.

“Change is overrated.”

He gives me a wry smile. “So why’d you do so much of it?”

I start at his direct question, but he doesn’t sound mad. More ... resigned. “Should I apologize?”

“Never to me.”

I give his shoulder a little push, retracting my hand before it gets too comfortable there. “So why are you asking?”

“I wanna get to know you again.”

“Sweet thought.” I need to deflect before this gets too personal. “Want to tell me what we’re having?”

He chuckles. “A burger and fries. Plus a large coffee. With cream.”

I cringe, which makes Tanner laugh. “Hey, Piper,” he calls. “Can you make Roo’s a black?”

Her gaze flicks between us. “You still call him that?”

“Of course.”

She screws up her nose with a friendly laugh. “I thought you would have left the pet names in high school.”

I feel rather than see the way Tanner tenses. “Now where’s the fun in that?”

“I’m only saying ...” She walks closer, coffees in hand, and gives Tanner a look I can’t decipher. “People will start talking again.”

“Eh. Screw people.” He lifts his coffee to his mouth, and I let myself watch his lips ... his throat ... for approximately two seconds before I turn my attention to my own drink.

“Sure singing a different tune to high school,” Piper says.

Tanner glances at me out of the corner of his eye, but my attention quickly shifts to Piper.

“What are you talking about?”

I don't like the way Piper's eyes light up. I've seen that look plenty, right before she launches into gossip, but when that gossip has to do with Tanner?

“You never told him?” She turns to me. “The swim team used to give Tanner shit.”

“Yep, thanks.”

“Since when?” I ask.

“Since always.” She shrugs like it's common knowledge. “Let's say there were a lot of slurs thrown around about you two. I'd find Tanner crying sometimes.”

He scoffs. “I never cried.”

“Well, close to it.”

They start to bicker, but my stomach drops. Tanner used to *cry*? How didn't I know that? Sure, we'd get teased sometimes about being together, but it was mostly ribbing from our friends or from assholes we didn't know. He never, not once, mentioned his *team*.

When our burgers come out I still feel vaguely sick, and seeing how familiar Tanner and Piper are, finding out she knows things about him that I never did ... none of it helps. I barely put a dint in my burger, but I force those fries down like I'm on a mission, anything to keep my mouth full so I can avoid their conversation.

More people I remember from school or around town come in, and they all seem genuinely happy to see me, which is a complete load of shit. When I was last here, it was always pitying looks or vaguely hidden disgust. In a town like Sunbury, where everyone is so *normal*, the slightest things set me apart.

I was the boy who had seizures.

And as those seizures ramped up, I was the boy who wet himself.

Then the boy who had to wear a fucking diaper, just to switch out one form of embarrassment for another.

When I became the boy who needed brain surgery, suddenly people realized the shit I was going through wasn't an ongoing joke. "*Oh, that Royce Williams had another episode today*" went from being a quirky amusement to sympathy currency.

Then I became the boy who left town.

I was never just *me*.

Not to anyone but Tanner.



CHAPTER FIVE
TANNER

It's a rough few days. Roo sleeps late on my couch, and I creep around the house, trying not to wake him. Trying not to watch if his breathing is even, or the way he still tosses and turns relentlessly. I can't turn off that side of me that studies him when he wakes up either. I'm waiting for the disorientation, the exhaustion that seems to hit him right before he seizes out. Thankfully, so far, so good.

He's been on that couch for three nights now, and I'm starting to feel really bad every time he wakes up and cringes as he stretches out his back and neck. I want to tease him that he looks about eighty, but we're not there yet.

Still, there are moments. Times like last night when we watched a movie together and I reminded him, not so gently, of how we used to have to cook two bowls of popcorn because he'd never share his own. And instead of punching me or throwing back a snarky line like he would have before, he wriggled closer and set the bowl between us.

He snuffles a bit, and the familiar sound of him waking up catches my attention. I shift closer, and something about his peaceful face has me making a split-second decision. The only way to move past the distance between us is to start acting like it's not there at all.

I walk over and yank the blanket off him.

Roo flinches and jerks awake. "Hey, what the hell was that for?"

"Time to get up."

He blindly feels around for his phone and squints one eye closed as he checks the time.

“Already after noon,” I inform him. “We’ve gotta shake that jet lag.”

“The jet lag can go fuck itself,” he grumbles, curling into a ball.

“Come on. *Up*. We’re going swimming.”

“Swimming?” He glances toward the window, where the curtains are still mostly closed. “It’s freezing outside.”

“Actually, it’s about forty degrees. Luckily, the pool is heated.”

He doesn’t move to get up. “You know how I feel about swimming.”

“Correction: I know how you *felt* about swimming.”

“Spoiler alert: that part hasn’t changed.”

“You used to say ...” I’m not sure whether to mention the reasons why he hated swimming, or if it would mean opening up old wounds.

“That I was too scrawny and didn’t want to seize out in the pool?”

My lips quirk. “I believe your exact words were, ‘The last thing I want is to emulate a dying fish,’ which was maybe the worst analogy I’ve ever heard you use.”

He finally opens his eyes and meets mine. “Accurate, though.”

Seeing him all curled up and sweet sends my protective instincts skyrocketing. Back in the day I would have given him anything he wanted when he looked at me like that. “You can’t use the scrawny excuse anymore. And you haven’t had a seizure the whole time you’ve been here, which is basically a record for you. I won’t leave your side, and if you piss yourself, you’ll be doing it in the pool, where hundreds of other people have done it before you.”

“I don’t piss myself anymore, asshole.”

I crouch down in front of him. “I wouldn’t care if you did.”

The fight in his expression melts. “I know. Even the first time it happened, right in the middle of school ...”

I cringe. “Between classes ...”

“And instead of getting embarrassed, you told people to fuck off. We were fifteen, and you stuck up for me anyway.”

I’m uncomfortable about reliving it. I *had* been embarrassed. And confused. And even though I’d seen him have seizures a few times before that, the pissing-himself thing had never happened. When I eventually noticed the front of his pants, nearly everyone else had already seen it. It was too late to protect him, so I’d done the first thing I’d thought of and lashed out at the people standing around. Somehow Roo escaped most of the teasing, but the swim team were always ready to whisper cruel things about him when only I could hear.

“Eh. You always had my back when people called me stupid. It was the least I could do.”

“*Right.*” He rolls his eyes like a petulant little shit, and I can’t stop myself from ruffling up his hair as I stand.

“Anyway, cute conversation. Now get your ass up.”

He groans. “No.”

“I wasn’t asking, Roo Roo.”

“Dear *God*, no.”

“You might be a big boy now,” I call as I head for my room, “but don’t think I won’t throw you over my shoulder if I need to.”

As soon as I get to my room, I grab my swim bag and start throwing in what I need. It’s been a while since I went and swam a couple of laps, and I miss it. If Roo doesn’t want to come, I’m not going to force him, but it’d

be nice to spend the day together before I have to head to work tonight.

I strip out of my clothes and pull on my swim trunks before redressing. As I head back out, I'm prepared for the fact that Roo has probably fallen back asleep.

What I'm not prepared for is the glimpse of his bare ass in the middle of my living room.

My brain stops.

I forget to blink.

Or breathe.

What the ...

I almost trip over my feet as I scramble back into the hall, hoping he didn't notice me. My brain still feels sluggish so I give my head a shake. It's not like I haven't seen his ass countless times, but walking in on him changing felt ... I dunno. *Pervy?* Maybe.

Why is my heart going crazy?

I press my hands to my face as I stifle an awkward laugh. Oh yeah, things are definitely going to take some adjusting. It's not like I don't see practically that same thing in the showers at the station. It was ... unexpected. Yep. Let's go with that.

I'm still a little puzzled by my mini freak-out when I go for take two, and this time walk into my living room without incident.

Thankfully, Roo's fully dressed, sardonic expression back in place as he nods at the bag hanging across my chest. "You grab a towel for me?"

"Of course."

He sighs. "Damn, that was my last out."

And for the first time since he got here, I was expecting that response. "You should know me better than that."

"Yeah, you're a stubborn bastard."

“Me?” I laugh. “Do I need to remind you of the week you hid out at my place in a standoff with your parents over spring break?”

“Okay, let’s not play that game. You win.”

“What’s wrong? Don’t want to be reminded of how your horrible parents tried to take you skiing in Aspen?”

“You know that’s not why I didn’t want to go.” His tone is bordering on grumpy, reminding me how he tries to hide anything emotional.

I want to hug him. The urge is strong, and I’m about a second away from slinging my arm around his shoulders and pulling him close, when he says, “For some reason, I didn’t want to leave my jerk-off best friend. Can’t for the life of me remember why.”

“Total mystery.”

Sunbury Swim Centre is where I first learned to swim. It’s where I made it onto the school swim team and qualified for nationals. It’s where I trained at five in the morning, while Roo sat, hood pulled over his head, grumpy expression in place, as he juggled timing my laps with draining his coffee.

It’s also where some of the assholes on my team liked to bully me about my sexuality.

It still makes me mad some days. The fact that because Roo and I were close and showed affection it automatically meant we were gay. I didn’t bother trying to correct them, because I knew pointing out I was straight was wasted energy when Roo and I never dated anyone anyway.

Dating always seemed ... like effort. And now that I’ve experienced dating, I can confirm it is a *lot* of effort, and when I’m already working two jobs, I don’t have the energy for it.

Plus, now that Roo is back, at least for a while, I don't know when the hell I'd fit in a girlfriend as well.

As soon as I enter the large cream building, I inhale long and deep, filling my nose with the smell of chlorine and something kinda dewy. Roo laughs, the sound low in his chest, and I give him a little nudge. "What's so funny?"

"I can't believe you still do that."

"I like the smell."

"Uh-huh."

"I *do*."

Roo smiles. "I'm not arguing."

No, he's just trying to rile me up. I should know better by now.

I lead the way over to the farthest lap lane, strip off my shirt, and kick off my shorts. My swim trunks are small, which I know isn't the *in* thing, but after years of training, I can't get into shorts.

Roo hesitates.

"Unless you're getting in the pool fully clothed, you might want to get moving."

"If you toss me in, I'll kill you."

"Mmhm," I say, matching his skeptical tone from earlier.

"I thought we covered that I'm the stubborn one. Wouldn't want me to hold a grudge." His face is completely deadpan.

"Oh no, not a *grudge*. I'm so sorry. I take everything back."

I don't miss the way he quickly yanks up his shirt to hide his grin.

And with his shirt gone, my suspicions are correct. He *does* look different. He's slim with lean muscles, which is a huge difference to when you could count his

ribs. The scrawny kid I knew is one hundred percent gone.

“Yes, I grew up into a big boy,” he says, heading for the stairs into the pool, and I take a moment to watch the way his back muscles flex as he moves.

Two other people are using the pool, but we have this whole side to ourselves, so I step up on the block and dive in.

The water feels great around me, natural, and as I swim the entire length of the pool, tumble turn, and swim back, my muscles come alive. I don't bother to time myself anymore. The only reason I swim these days is because it's my one outlet to switch off from the world.

When I make it back to the other end, Roo is sitting on the step, watching. “Damn, you're amazing at that.”

“Well, I had a drill sergeant pushing me hard,” I say, drifting over to sit next to him.

“To be fair, you didn't give me a choice to be here, so I didn't give you a choice to slack off.”

“We make a great team.”

He turns his head to look at me, and something in my chest settles. Like I'm finally able to believe he's here.

I watch as Roo's jaw works, almost like he wants to say something. Then he stops, and he seems to relax too. “Yeah, we really do.”

“And that's why you'd forgive me for anything, right?”

The confusion has barely taken over his face when I loop one arm around his waist and throw us both forward off the edge. The noise from above cuts off as the water rushes over us. Roo wriggles out of my hold, and we drift underwater for a moment, bubbles streaming out of our noses as we watch each other. Then Roo flips me the bird and kicks up to the surface.

I duck-dive farther down, plant my feet on the bottom of the pool, then propel myself upward, using the

momentum to grab Roo and launch him farther into the pool. I catch his yelp as my head breeches the water.

“Asshole,” he splutters when he comes up for air. His hair is plastered to his head, dripping steadily, and he reaches up to swipe it out of his eyes. He sends a torrent of water in my direction, and I send a wave right back before swimming closer.

“See? This isn’t so bad.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” His breathing is getting heavier as he treads water, so he swims closer and slides an arm around my shoulders.

“Geez, out of breath already?” I joke, more so I won’t focus on the fact that he’s touching me voluntarily for the first time.

“You just tried to drown me,” he points out.

I laugh. “Dramatic much?”

“Hasn’t changed.”

That settles me a little. “Remember when Ross from my swim team called me a dumbass one morning?”

The smile Roo tries to squash is a definite yes. “In my defense, I was still half asleep.”

“You threw his backpack in the pool. School books and everything.”

“Never said it again, did he?” He looks way too smug over something that happened seven years ago.

The thing is, though, it did keep happening, but since everyone knew what a short fuse Roo had when it came to me, they got a lot sneakier about when they said shit.

“Tell me something I don’t know about you,” Roo blurts out.

My eyebrows jump up. “Ah, like what?”

“I don’t know. That’s the point of the question.”

Huh, I guess it is. I frown at the ripples in the water as I try to think of something—anything—Roo might not

know about me. “I ...” What? Where the hell was I going with that? “I don’t think there’s anything you don’t know.”

“Nothing?”

“Not off the top of my head. What about you?”

He bites his freckled lip as he thinks. “I’m sure there’s probably a lot. Out of curiosity, is there anything I could tell you that would make you hate me?”

I scoff. “Never.”

“What about if I hurt animals for fun?”

The hypothetical takes me a second. “Yeah, okay, that would be a deal breaker.”

“Or if I was an arsonist?”

I shake my head. “But you’re not those things.”

“I’m not. But like you said, things are different. Maybe there are things about me you wouldn’t like.”

And out of all the hypotheticals in the world, those are a steaming pile of stupid. “Nah, because no matter how much you’ve changed, you’re still a good person. So I don’t think anything would make me walk away.”

His expression is full of skepticism. “Remember you said that.”

“Should I be worried?”

“I don’t think so.” But he doesn’t look happy.

And Roo being unhappy is unacceptable. Deciding the conversation is over, I grab the hand resting on my shoulder and tug him until he’s behind me, before grabbing his other hand and locking his arms around my neck.

“Tanner, what are you—”

Holding his wrists with one hand, I dive, submerging us again, but this time I don’t let him go. If swimming gets him out of breath, then I’ll make things easy for him, because that’s what I do.

We spend another hour there, Roo holding on as I swim up and down the pool. We toss *remember whens* back and forth, and his voice in my ear reminds me of old times. Of falling asleep listening to his fierce rants about the world. Or his jokes. Or his plans for the future.

“You’re not wearing your medi-bracelet anymore,” I say, running a thumb over his wrist.

“Nah, I hated that thing. Since my seizures are so infrequent, I ditched it.”

“But they still happen.”

“Sometimes.”

“So ...” I tread carefully. “Wouldn’t it be better to wear it? Just in case?”

His voice is tense when he answers. “If I can spend a year in a foreign country with total randoms without it, I think I’ll be okay in fucking Sunbury, Oregon.”

I wanna argue, but now probably isn’t the time. This is supposed to be about us reconnecting. “Now you’re here, are you going to start looking for a job?”

He hums. “Maybe. I saved a bunch of money while I was working, and Mom and Dad are fine with sending me whatever I need until I’m settled. Even if I do stay for a little bit, I can’t imagine there’s a lot going in my field.”

“Portland, maybe?”

“I *could* commute like Dad used to, but two hours on a bus is way longer than forty-five minutes in a car. Even then, I’m not sure how much demand there is for electrical engineers.”

“Probably more than for firemen who can’t read.”

Roo’s chest hits my back as he laughs. “You *can* read.” He pinches my shoulder. “Stop fishing for sympathy.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do. And just because comprehension isn’t your thing, doesn’t mean you can’t do better next time. But

you *need* to get assistance. That's why they offer it."

I groan. "I know *you* don't think it's a big deal, but the other guys will judge me for it. You heard what Piper said about the swim team, and Byers was the *worst*. *He* has a permanent position there, and trust me when I say that jackass hasn't changed."

"So you're worried he'll tease you for it? Since when do you let small-minded people get in your way?"

"It's not only that," I mumble. Because, yeah, of course I don't want to deal with him being a shit, but requesting help means I won't earn the role on my own merit. It feels like cheating.

"Then what is it?"

I really should know by now that Roo wouldn't accept my excuses. "Can we not talk about this?"

"All right ... But we'll be coming back to it."

"Can't wait."

When we eventually climb out of the pool, my fingers are all pruney, and Roo immediately starts shivering in the cold air. I hand him his towel, and smile as he wraps it snugly around his shoulders.

"Come on, let's take a quick shower."

There's no one in the bathroom, so I strip down and turn on the water. It's warm, and even though I don't feel the cold so much, it still feels great. Roo takes the shower next to me, and I'm surprised to see he's left his swim trunks on.

"Feeling modest, huh?"

"Something like that," he says, keeping his back to me. Oh well, another thing to add to the *changed* column, I guess. My best friend is suddenly shy.

We finish up quickly, dry off, and get dressed, Roo still keeping his back firmly to me. It gives me a good view of his ass again, and unlike last time, I notice the groove of muscles on either side. The tan line. How

round it is. And those two little dimples in his lower back, straddling his spine.

Yep. He's done a lot of changing.

I have to swallow before I can speak again.

"Ready to head home?" I ask when we're both dressed. He's wearing sweats and a hoodie and looks ready to take on a snowstorm. His cheeks are flushed from the heat of the shower, his eyes bright.

"Sounds sort of funny. Us living together."

"Well, it was always the plan."

"True. Only happened five years behind schedule."

I throw everything into my bag and sling it over my shoulder. "Just means we get to make up for lost time."

"Oh yeah?" He reaches over and shoves my chest gently. "How do you reckon we're going to do that?"

"I dunno, but I'm sure we'll figure it out."



CHAPTER SIX
Roo

I'm the equivalent of a man-child as Tanner dresses for work and I try not to mope over the fact that he's leaving me for the night. We've had a good few days together, but every time I try to tell him I'm gay, the words get stuck. I know I don't owe him anything, but it's not something I *want* to keep from him. It's inevitable that I'll tell him soon—my sanity depends on it—but I need to find the words.

Still, I can't force myself to say it. I want to milk every last minute I have with him.

"You sure you're okay?" he asks, walking back into the room. I'm only a teensy bit disappointed his full uniform is at the station because that T-shirt and pants combo is doing it for me. Put *him* in a fireman calendar, and they'll sell out in minutes. Sure, those copies would all be to *me*, but still.

"I've managed to last five years without you. I doubt I'm going to fall apart in a night."

He sighs and shakes his head, golden hair catching the living-room light. "Famous last words."

I shift down farther on the couch. "You can put it on my tombstone."

He bares his teeth as he cringes. "I don't like joking about that."

"Aw, would you miss me?" I already know his answer, and I know I'm pushing it, but I'll never not love hearing how much he cares about me. And how he states it like an indisputable fact.

“*Duh.*” He heads into the kitchen to grab his dinner from the fridge. “You sure you don’t need me to leave you some?”

“Nah, I’ll order takeaway.”

He snorts. “*Takeaway.* God, you’re such an Aussie now.”

“I was always an Aussie.”

“Maybe when we first met.” He crosses his arms over the counter and grins at me. “But I Americanized you real quick. Showed you the error of your ways. Now ...” Tanner lifts his eyes to the ceiling. “Your accent doesn’t know what it’s doing, and you’re using phrases like *takeaway.*”

“Takeout, then.” His teasing is like music to my ears. “Y’all small-town folks heard of it?”

He picks up an apple and pegs it at me so fast, I barely manage to bat it away in time. “Our takeout actually tastes good. None of that fast-food crap.”

“I didn’t realize you were picky about your food.”

“I’m basically a connoisseur. Should start my own blog.”

I snort. “Ten years ago, maybe. And I think you need to know how to turn on a computer first.”

“Hey ...” He lifts up his phone. “I can video-call and everything now.”

“Took you long enough.” I lift my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them. “I missed seeing your face.”

He holds my stare a moment, happiness practically pouring from him. “Lucky you get to see it every day now.”

“Lucky doesn’t cover it.” I’m not even trying to flirt; it’s just ... the truth.

“Eh.” He waves his hand like he’s embarrassed. “Right back at you.”

“I’ll see you in the morning?” I curl up on the couch, trying hard not to pout.

He catches me off guard with his laugh. “Morning. Right. Do you even know what that is?”

“It’s the thing that happens when I drink too much.”

“*Sure* it is.” He eyes where I’m lying with my hands tucked under my cheek. “You know, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about the sleeping situation.” He shuffles his feet, and it takes me a moment to remember I *shouldn’t* be staring at his pecs.

His round pecs.

His pecs that I was admiring earlier when they were beaded with water ...

“Sleeping situation?”

“Yeah, the couch can’t be too comfortable.” He rounds the kitchen counter and props himself against a wall, heavy boots planted wide, hands tucked in his pockets. “I won’t be home tonight, so you can take my bed.”

That gets my attention. I sit up, staring at him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, well, it makes sense, right? I haven’t washed the sheets, but ...”

My loud snort cuts him off. “You really think I care about that when you *know* how filthy my bedroom was when we were younger?”

“True.” He laughs. “Your room stank.”

“Which is why I always stayed at your place. No guy has the right to be as obsessively clean as you are.”

He holds out his hands and looks around. “You’re welcome.”

“Thanks. And I don’t mean for the place being clean, because I do not give a single fuck about that. Thanks for the bed.”

“Okay. Well. Enjoy.”

Tanner throws his bag over his shoulder, and I watch as he grabs his food, keys, wallet, and phone, making a flustered mess of his exit, and when he finally gets to the door, he pauses.

“Hey, Roo?”

I poke my head over the back of the couch. “Yeah?”

“What do you call it when four kangaroos have sex?”

A tiny part of me dies inside, even as a stupid smile takes over my face. It’s a mistake, though, because as soon as he sees it, I resign myself to the fact that these jokes are back and here to stay. “If you say a kang—”

“A kangbang.”

His laugh is loud, and I flip him off as he pulls the door closed behind him.

I’d really thought we were done with the stupid jokes I’d reluctantly taught him the summer before freshman year. Apparently he’s decided there’s no better time to revive them than when we’re trying to get our friendship back to normal.

And as much as I hate those jokes, I also love that he remembers.

I wish he were still here to annoy me with more.

The brief lightness in my mood dissolves into darkness. How the hell did I get through five years when I miss him so much after only five seconds?

So instead of watching TV or dicking around on my phone, I take a shower, get into my pajamas, and crawl into Tanner’s bed with a book. The blankets and pillows smell so much like him, it’s as if he’s here with me.

I curl up on his side of the bed, tuck his teddy under my arm, and let my eyes fall closed. I’m right on the edge of falling into melodramatic longing, but I push it all away and sink into the comfort it brings me instead.

It’s so tempting to jerk off. So, so tempting after a long day of feeling his body sliding against mine in the water, of glimpsing his thick cock hanging between his

legs in the shower, his round ass, what he was wearing before he headed to the fire station ...

I laugh and bite down on my fist to try and dissuade my interested dick. Thankfully, I get it to calm down before it's too late, and instead focus on my book.

I feel more relaxed than I have in days, weeks, years. I feel home.

I have no idea when I fell asleep. The only thing I'm vaguely aware of are fingers lightly stroking through my hair. They're comforting, steady, and I lean into them a little as a smile tugs at my lips.

"Good morning," Tanner's rough voice says. Then he laughs. "Or should I say afternoon?"

"Hmm?" I grunt as I come to, peeking out at the analogue clock he has sitting on his side table. It's already twelve thirty. "Ah, shit." I push up, still half asleep, and go to swing my legs out of his bed, even as my body tries to fight me on it.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"I meant to be out of here before you got home from work. Sorry. I—"

"Overslept? Shocker." He grabs my shoulder and gives me a little tug. "No point running off now."

Okay, true. If it's this late, he's probably been home for a while now. Does that mean we've been sharing a bed this entire time? I collapse back against the pillow and turn to him. Without the long hair I'm used to, I can't work out if he's been asleep already, because it looks exactly the way it always does.

"Fair warning, Mom was messaging me. She said now that you're back, she fully expects you to help out with the Sunflora festival."

"Is she *still* in charge of that?"

“Sure is.”

“God, it’s like she doesn’t remember me at all.”

Tanner laughs. “Good sleep?”

“Yeah, actually. My back doesn’t feel like it wants to murder me.” I cringe for effect before my face relaxes again. “What about you? You’re not just coming to bed now, are you?”

Tanner smiles, and his teeth are almost as white as his shirt. “Nah, I got home before six, so I’ve had a few hours’ sleep. Unlike someone I know, I’m not greedy about it.”

I smirk as Tanner reaches for the blankets, then pulls the heavy duvet up over my chest, and makes a fuss of checking it’s tucked in around me. My heart swoons. “I’m not greedy,” I say, trying to find my voice again. “But I’m not this pretty by accident, you know.”

“I know.” He grunts. “I’ve seen all those little bottles in the bathroom.”

“Nothing wrong with a good skin-care regimen.” My dry throat has my voice coming out in a croak. It doesn’t help when Tanner shifts onto his side, head propped on one hand, and his legs move so close to mine, I can feel their heat under the blanket. It’s so tempting to close the small amount of space between us, but I hold off.

“You’ll have to teach me sometime.”

“Sure thing.” I narrow my eyes at him playfully. “Seems you like what I’ve done with my hair too. Now, I forgave you for the watching-me-sleep thing, but hair-stroking? Tanner, that’s next level.”

He laughs, even as his cheeks tinge pink. “Sorry.”

I shrug. “Don’t be. Not like it’s the first time I’ve woken up to you groping me.”

“Hey, that was *one* time.”

“You were snuggling me.” I try not to smile. “With a massive boner. Don’t think I’ve forgotten.”

“Roo ...” He buries his face in his free hand. “I thought we swore we’d never mention that again.”

“No, we swore we’d never speak of it to anyone. Both of us already know.”

He scowls. “Don’t act like you never get morning wood. I swear I’d wake up to that thing *looking* at me.”

“Maybe, but I never rubbed it up against you, did I?” No matter how desperately I wanted to.

“You know ...” His forehead wrinkles as he looks at me again. “We’ve shared a bed so many times, it seems kinda dumb for you to be sleeping on the couch. Like, who the hell made that decision?”

“I don’t know. It felt weird. I mean, we’re a lot bigger now than we were then. And I think we can both agree things feel different now.”

“Eh.” He flops back onto his back, and this time I shift up onto my side to see him. “Is it weird if I say it was nice? Having you here this morning?”

Nerves tickle my gut. “Maybe it should be. But it feels ... normal.”

The relief on Tanner’s face makes me reach over and flick his nose.

“Then you can stay in here until your bed comes. No more sore back.”

“I’m not going to argue.” Though for sure, I should. Because yeah, my back is going to be a hell of a lot better sleeping in an actual bed, but that morning boner is going to be a real issue. Especially when the problem isn’t only relegated to the mornings. Just having Tanner stretched out beside me like this already has my cock’s interest, and I’m suddenly very thankful I have the blanket for protection.

Goddamn, I need to hurry up and tell him.

“So ...” His tongue swipes across his bottom lip, and I hate how much I notice it. “The surgery. I’m guessing

you have a scar from it. Is that why you've grown your hair?"

"Ah, so that's why you were petting me like a dog?"

"Kinda." His eyes turn sheepish, like he knows I'll forgive him for anything when he gives me that look.

He's right that I'm growing my hair to hide the faded pink line from where they literally peeled back my scalp. It's not so much that I'm embarrassed by it, though, more that it always leads to questions when people see it, which then leads to talking about my seizures, and *Yes, I'm epileptic*, and *Oh, you know someone who is ... nice ...*, because what else do you say to that?

And while I might not be embarrassed, it sure as hell makes me feel vulnerable. I don't want to be the sick kid anymore. It's one of the reasons I refuse to wear that stupid bracelet.

"I'm so happy it worked for you," he says, gaze catching on where I'm sure he can see the end of the faded scar in front of my ear.

"Funny." I smile. "Me too."

Tanner shifts so he's on his side again, and we lie there looking at each other for a moment. So close, I feel his exhales ghost my skin.

His voice dips low when he speaks. "I was a bit in awe of you growing up."

"*Me?*" There is no way I heard that right.

"Yeah, *you*. You didn't give a shit what anyone thought, and you went through more than most people did."

"Oh no, I definitely cared."

"Okay, but you never let it get to you."

"You know it did. Seizing out at school, the fucking *diapers*—"

"They weren't diapers. They were absorbent underwear."

“They were bulky and horrible and the absolute bane of my existence.”

“I know.” His soft voice derails the fit I was working up to, and I take a deep breath.

“There was *a lot* I hated about myself.”

Tanner’s eyebrows bunch up, and he runs one large hand over my head, then snatches it away like he’s second-guessing himself. “There was a lot you hated, but you *never* hated yourself. You flipped off anyone who gave you shit, and did what you wanted.”

The fact that he sees it that way ... My head drops forward as I start laughing. “That’s because I had *you*. Because I knew that no matter what, shit between us would never change, and if anyone *really* upset me, you’d kick their ass.”

“Again, that only happened *once*. I hated fighting.”

“And yet you still beat Toby Michels into the ground when he poured water in my lap and called me a baby.”

Even now, seven years later, Tanner’s jaw gets tighter. “Asshole.”

“See? You always had my back.”

“I always will. It just ... pissed me off. I’d see how exhausted and checked out you were before and after a seizure. Those things took a lot out of you. It wasn’t fair that dumbasses thought they could give you shit about it too.”

And lying here, studying my best friend, agreeing to share his bed, going over old memories ... it makes me feel lighter than I have in a long time. But I can’t enjoy it. Because of the big gay elephant in the room.

I lick my dry lips as I try to form the words in my head. As I try to convince myself that I need to tell him. Because holding myself back, when he’s making every effort to reconnect, isn’t just uncomfortable for me, it’s unfair to him.

And this closeness—not only the physical part—is starting to mess with my head. I swear his stare dips to my mouth, which makes me do the same. I trace his lips with my gaze, wishing it were my tongue instead. All I want is to press closer, to feel his warmth, to taste his breath.

Suddenly, the thick blanket feels too restrictive.
“Maybe ...”

His eyes flick to mine again, and this is the first time in so long that I’ve been able to hold eye contact with him. It’s like a punch to the chest how much I love it.

“Maybe what?”

“Remember how I asked if there was anything I could tell you that would make you rethink our friendship?”

“And remember how I told you no?”

“What if ...” I catch the side of my bottom lip with my teeth and bite down hard before releasing it. The echoing sting helps me get the words out. “What if I told you I’m gay?”

CHAPTER SEVEN
TANNER

The question immediately yanks my attention from where he bit his lip, and I meet his eyes. “Are you ... Is that another hypothetical?” I don’t mean my voice to come out as quiet as it does, and I clear my throat, trying to dislodge the heavy something that just landed in it.

He doesn’t answer. Not with words. But the way he looks at me, like he’s steeling himself for a punch to his face, breaks my heart.

It’s not a hypothetical.

He’s gay.

Roo’s gay.

“I ...”

“You don’t have to say anything,” he rushes to tell me. “It’s fine. I just needed to get that out there. And now I have. And now we can pretend it never happened.”

I blink at him. “W-why?”

Roo’s *gay*? And I didn’t know?

“Because it’s not exactly a conversation a straight man wants to have with a gay man in his bed.”

His response makes me frown. “How about you let me decide what I wanna talk about?”

He sucks in a breath, and seems to draw into himself.

“How long have you known?” I ask.

He stares at the sheets, clearly not wanting to answer. Finally he swallows whatever has made him

withdraw. “Since ... sophomore year maybe?”

That long? That long and I never picked up on it? At some point my hand leaves the bed between us and settles over my clamped mouth, and I’m only half-conscious of the movement. Because all I can concentrate on is the fact that Roo’s gay ... and I didn’t know. What kind of best friend completely *misses* that?

“And you didn’t tell me.” It’s not a question, or an accusation. It’s a fact. Somehow, I let him down.

“I’m sorry.”

“*What?*” My outburst gets his attention. “No, no.” I hurry to reach for him because I *need* to. I need to feel his soft beard under my hand and make him listen to what I’m about to say. “*I’m* sorry you thought you had to keep it from me. That I didn’t pay enough attention. I should have known.”

“How the hell would you have known?”

“I ... dunno.” I snatch my hand back to rub it over my hair. “I don’t know. All I know is I should have. How can I call myself your best friend when I missed it?”

He stares at me a moment, and I hope he knows how sincere I’m being. “You don’t care. Like, it’s not ... freaking you out?”

“Why would it?”

I’m relieved to see some of his tension melt away. “*We just discussed* you spooning me with a massive erection. You shared a bed with a gay man, and it’s far from the first time. I used to sit on your lap all the damn time, and people used to tease us for dating. None of that makes you ... well, uncomfortable?”

I tilt my head. Even as he lists all the reasons I *should* feel something, all I know is a deep sense of contentment that those things happened. That he finally told me. That he’s still here. “No. We’ve both always said guys can be close and show feelings and it shouldn’t be weird. That still stands.”

His eyes narrow. “Really?”

“I don’t see why it should change.”

“Rich Bladley?”

I know the name, but not why he’s throwing it out now. “Yeah?”

“You used to say all the time that he made you uncomfortable.”

“Huh—*oh!*” I did. A lot. That dude was almost on the other side of my fist a few times too. But not because he was gay. Or at least, not totally because of it. “He did. Because of the way he talked about you.”

“What?”

I shrug, and it’s too stiff to be casual, but now that Roo’s made me remember, those old feelings of wanting to punch something are coming back. “He used to say you were hot,” I mumble. “Used to talk about your ass a lot.” And like that, *I’m* thinking of his ass, and after getting an eyeful of it yesterday, I can kind of get why Rich was so obsessed with it. As far as asses go, it’s a good one.

“You hated him because he, what? Had a crush on me?”

I quickly shake my head. “No, not ... Well, it wasn’t like that. It wasn’t only that he *liked* you, it was the *way* he said things. It made me mad.”

“Did it?” For some reason Roo thinks this part of the conversation is funny because I can tell he’s trying to hold back a smile.

“Don’t worry, I taught him a lesson.”

“So did I.”

That takes me by surprise. “What? What did you do?”

“He tried to grope me, so I kneed him in the balls.”

“*That’s* what happened?” And completely out of my control, my jaw starts to clench again. He put his hands on my Roo? My fist itches to hit something. “If I’d known

that, I would have done way worse than stuff my worn gym socks in his locker over the weekend.”

Roo barks out a laugh. “I don’t know. I’ve smelled those gym socks, and they were lethal.”

“Yeah?” I can’t help my smile. “I wore them running every day for a week before it.”

He wriggles closer. “In some states that could have been considered attempted murder.”

“Eh. Still would have been worth it.”

And it would have. Then and now, I’d do anything for Roo. His eyelashes look almost bronze under the sunlight from my window, and it hits me with a pang that I already knew that about him and had clearly forgotten.

“Can I hug you?” I ask, feeling like my chest might split in two if he says no.

And he’s clearly forgotten how affectionate *I* can be, because he looks surprised for a moment before nodding. I pull him down against me, until his chest is resting over mine, his head on my shoulder. I let out a loud sigh, not caring how idiotic it must sound, because when he wraps his arms around me, it reminds me of everything I’ve been missing. Roo’s warmth, Roo’s touch, Roo’s presence. It all works together and reaches me on a level I don’t share with anyone else.

There’s no way I can let him leave me again.

He laughs. “You good now?”

“Nah.” I tighten my arms around his back. “I’m not in a hurry.”

I hold him until I feel the tension completely leave his body. His soft breaths puff against my neck, and even though I’ve already had all the sleep I normally do after an all-nighter, I’m so relaxed, I could easily drift off again.

Then Roo’s stomach grumbles. “Ignore it,” he murmurs, sounding half asleep too. But unlike me, I

don't doubt he could fall back asleep.

"Nope. Time to get our lazy asses up."

"But I don't wanna ..." He nuzzles his face into my shoulder. "Comfy pillow."

"Your pillow will still be here tonight," I say, sitting up and taking him with me. Before I can turn to climb out of bed, though, he grabs my hand, linking his fingers through mine.

"I'm still not convinced you won't freak out on me, but ... thank you. For not making this weird."

It breaks my heart that he thinks I would have in the first place. It makes me a little mad at him too, if I'm honest. But I've also heard the flip side—kids being kicked out and disowned, or beat up by their friends—and the anger quickly fizzles out. "You're still my Roo. That's all that matters to me."

I don't know what it was about Roo fessing up about his sexuality that burst through the wall between us, but the last few days have been like old times. He keeps his popcorn to himself while we watch movies, snuggled into my side or with his feet propped in my lap. The light, casual touches are back, and I forget to think twice about what I say or do and instead act completely on instinct. Exactly how it's always been.

I slow down my jog as I notice Roo is no longer behind me.

"I hate you," he huffs from a few feet back, hunched over his knees and puffing little bursts of mist from his mouth. "It's cold. I'm unfit. And this time of the morning shouldn't be a time at all."

His dramatics make me smile. "Well, we're halfway now. Even if you do wanna head back, it'll be the same distance as if you kept going."

He glares at me. “Why do I feel like I’ve been tricked into this?”

“All I said was I’m going for a jog.”

“No.” He stalks closer, hands on his hips. “You literally *kicked* me out of bed, and said, ‘Oh, Roo, you awake? Might as well come for a walk with me then.’”

I screw up my face, like I’m trying to remember. “Huh. I don’t recall.”

“How convenient.”

I wrap my arm around his waist and get him to start walking. I don’t let go again until I’m convinced he’s not going to protest. “If you can make it to O’Connell Road, I’ll buy you a coffee.”

“Better make it a large,” he mutters, storming off ahead.

I let him go, admiring the way his shirt is plastered to his back. Nothing like a good workout. “You’ll thank me when all the guys are throwing themselves at you,” I tease, catching up to him.

He snorts and shakes his head. “*All* the guys, hey?” He pretends to glance around. “Funny, none have come running yet.”

“That’s only because there are no gay guys in Sunbury. Anywhere else and they’ll all want you.”

He eyes me for a moment. “No gay guys in Sunbury?”

“Nope.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

His tone makes me reconsider. “Not that I know of.”

“There was a gay couple next to us having breakfast the other day. And also women kissing at the bar the first night I was here. Are you serious?”

There *were*? “I ... Well, on your first night back I was a bit distracted with having you home.”

“Right.” There’s something about his tone I don’t like.

“What does that mean?”

“What?” He doesn’t look at me.

“*Right*. Like I’ve done something wrong.”

He waves a hand. “You’re ... I know you’re not homophobic, so don’t get pissed, but you’re like your parents. You only see what you want to see.”

“I do not. I just don’t go around sticking my nose into other people’s business.”

“Okay, Tanner.”

“Don’t *okay, Tanner* me. Is this a thing? Are you turning it into a big deal because I didn’t notice two random couples in town?”

“Okay, then.” He stops, hands on his hips, and faces me. “What about Circus?”

“What *about* Circus?”

I swear Roo’s eyes almost bulge out of his head. “Circus is queer. He’s literally never tried to hide it. The pan colors are *on his profile*.”

“I don’t even know what that means.” And I’m trying hard not to get cranky, but the words come out on a long groan.

Roo’s hands drop from his hips. “You barely internet, so I suppose that’s true.”

“Not like I get much free time,” I mutter, staring at the house across the street. When I’m not working at one of my two jobs, there are always people around town to help with this or that. And since Roo’s return, he’s taken up every other spare moment. “Plus, I wouldn’t understand a word I was reading anyway.”

“Okay, fair point.”

“Can you, umm ... help me?”

“With?”

“You know ...” I hold out my hands, helpless.
“Colors, pan, queer, all of it. I get what it means to be gay and bi and lesbian, but I’ve got no clue about the rest.”

“You want me to teach you the way of the gays?”

At first I think he’s being sarcastic, but then I catch his smile. I’ve always been firm that you treat all people the same, and maybe I should already know this stuff, but I’ve never had much of a reason to go actively looking it up. Until now.

“Is that okay?”

He eyes me for a moment, then smiles. “Of course it’s okay. And who knows”—he slaps me on the ass before jogging ahead—“you might even like it.”



CHAPTER EIGHT
Roo

“When did you become such a heavy bastard?”
Tanner grunts as we reach Harvey’s Burger House. He sets me down, and I reluctantly let go of his neck as my feet hit the pavement.

“And yet you made it all the way here without dropping me.”

“Won’t be happening again.”

I smile. “We’ll see.” All it took was me sitting on the ground and refusing to move until he piggybacked me in here. And I’d do it all over again if it meant rubbing up against his back for another half a mile.

“You’re buying me a soda.”

“A *soda*,” I mock, loving the way he draws out his o’s. And sure, Sunbury has its issues, but this time around I’m not totally hating it.

Piper is behind the counter again when we walk in, and Tanner holds a hand up in greeting, then leads me to a booth. The vinyl squeaks as I slide in, and Tanner hands me a menu without bothering to open his.

“Already know what you’re having?” I ask.

“The usual.”

“Of course, the usual.” I shake my head. “Which is?”

“Big breakfast.”

Well, he didn’t get a body that could haul my ass around by going for the salad. “I don’t even know if I can stomach anything yet. Especially if we’re running back.”

“We definitely are.”

I sneer at the menu like it’s flipping me off. “Guess I’m going for the toast, then.”

“Soda?”

“If you want it down the front of you when you’re carrying me home.”

He doesn’t immediately respond, and when I glance at him, he’s smiling.

“Yes?”

“I like that.”

“What?”

“Home. That our place is home, and you’re there with me.”

I eye him for a moment, waiting for the punchline. Yeah, *home* is amazing with him, but there’s a very clear reason why I think that way. “Getting sentimental in your old age?”

He laughs and kicks my foot under the table but doesn’t answer. “So, you don’t need to take medication anymore?”

“Nope. It never worked anyway, and the few we tried after the surgery didn’t make a difference. No point dealing with all that if I don’t have to.”

“I’m glad. Some of the ones you tried made you really sick.”

“Yeah, throwing my guts up at school was never exactly fun. Damn, high school was great.”

“We did have good times, though.”

“If being back here has reminded me of anything, it’s that there are way more shit memories than good.”

Tanner’s face falls, and he picks up his menu. “You know what you want?”

“Yep.” I say, feeling the tiniest bit guilty for bringing the mood down.

“Cool. I’ll go order.” He jumps up before I can object, and after I tell him what I want, he makes a beeline for Piper. I watch each long, confident stride as he skirts around the tables between us and the counter.

Sharing a bed last night was a special kind of torture. Every time Tanner moved, it was like the air in the room pulled tight, wrapped around me, and sent every nerve vibrating with the force of an impaled arrow. His heavy breaths, and the occasional brush of his leg or his arm, or the one time his bent knee rested against my ass ... None of that is appropriate to be thinking of in the middle of a burger house, surrounded by families.

I watch Tanner shift from foot to foot as Piper crosses her arms over the counter and leans toward him. Her smile is huge, and a weird feeling prickles up my spine, like a primitive leftover of survival of the fittest or some shit. No matter how much I’m logically aware that Tanner and I aren’t a thing, the need to walk over and claim him is strong.

Because while we might not be dating—and probably never will be—he’s mine. And no way am I letting him go for Piper fucking Harvey. Tanner finally shifts away from the counter and starts in my direction. He looks up. Catches my eyes. And my stupid heart flips at being his sole focus.

He flicks my nose on his way past, and it goes a long way toward relieving some of the sticky doubt that started to creep in. He knows I’m gay, and nothing’s changed between us. Was I a patron saint in a past life?

“Wanna start my education?” he asks after letting me stare at him for a moment.

“No time like the present. What do you want to know?”

He picks up the saltshaker from the middle of the table and sprinkles some in his hand. “I dunno what there is to know, so I don’t really know what I’m missing. You know?” He licks the pile of salt from his palm and grins at me.

“I can’t believe you still do that.”

He smiles. “It tastes good.”

“Yeah, but it’s bad for you.”

“So are a lot of things. But if I like something, I’m going to keep at it. Life’s too short to give up what makes you happy.”

Okay, what’s that supposed to mean? Is he still talking about salt, or does he somehow know where my thoughts are at and is warning me not to mess up our friendship? I swallow thickly, quickly breaking eye contact.

“All right, so here’s your first lesson in *That’s So Queer*. There’s a thing called the Kinsey Scale that ranges from zero to six. I’m a big old six. Straight people are a zero, and then there’s a whole bunch of people who range between one and five. Some of those people call themselves *bi*, some use *heteroflexible*, others prefer no label, and some people—like Circus—don’t give a fuck about the scale and care more about the person than their gender.”

He groans. “I don’t know what any of that means.”

Okay, different approach, then. I borrow a pen and pad from Piper, then return to the table and sketch a line with numbers beneath it. Tanner has always done better with visual cues.

“This is me.” I circle the six. “Totally gay, dick obsessed, never been with a woman.” I circle the zero. “This is ...” I almost say his name. I *should*, given that’s how he’s always identified, but saying it makes things feel too definite. “A straight person. One hundred percent into the opposite sex.” Then I draw a circle around the other numbers. “And this is everyone who isn’t *exclusively* attracted to either the same or the opposite sex. Make sense?”

“Yeah.” He shoots me a quick smile. “Sorry.”

I jab the pen at him, tracking a line of ink over his forearm. “Say sorry again, and your face is next.”

“I’m terrified.” And he doesn’t need to roll his eyes when his tone practically does it for him.

“Done being a smartass?”

“Sorry, continue.”

I lift the pen. “What did you say?”

“Sor-ah, I mean—”

“You’ve done it now.”

I lunge across the table, pen ready, but Tanner catches my wrist and ducks out of the way. I redouble my efforts, grin possibly manic, and he looks the same. It’s such a complete throwback to what things between us used to be like, that it takes me a minute to realize I’ve stopped trying altogether and he’s just sitting there, staring at me with warm brown eyes.

A throat clears beside us, making me jump.

Piper sets down our drinks. “Coffees?” Her tone is flat, and she slides them onto the table and leaves before either of us can reply.

“What’s her deal?”

“Nothing.” Tanner’s shrug is rough as his large fingers pick up the tiny packets of sugar. He’s blushing to his ears, and that nasty feeling settles over me again.

“*Still* a terrible liar. What’s up?” I force myself to sound teasing, even as my chest tries to close in on itself. “You into her or something?”

“No.” He looks up, and his response is a little too sudden and certain.

I eye him. “Right ...”

He rubs at his neck as he glances toward the counter, then leans in a little closer. “We dated in high school.”

“*What?*” My surprise overrides any other reaction.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, now’s not the time to get bashful on me. How the hell didn’t I know that?” The teasing is gone, and my

question comes out harder than intended. But honestly, what the hell? He *dated* someone in high school? We didn't date. We *never* dated. Not anyone. It was always Tanner and Roo with no room for anyone else. Except ...

"We were both swimmers. We hung out a bit after training, and she helped me with the bullying, and then one day we kissed. No big deal."

"Except you dated?" I press my fingers into my temples where a headache is starting to build.

"You okay?"

"Fine. Continue. Kissing and dating and shit."

He sighs. "I didn't *realize* we were dating. We hung out a few times while you were busy, and we sometimes kissed. It was ... I dunno. Then she started to get mad because I never wanted to do anything with her if you were free, and ..." He shrugs again. "We broke up. She said some things, and it took us the rest of senior year and a bit after to become friends again."

"Could have mentioned that when I asked what I didn't know about you." It takes all my energy to keep my voice even. "I don't know how you didn't realize you guys were *dating*."

"Eh, it was never a big thing to me. She was pretty, and nice, and smelled like flowers. But spending more time with her would have taken away from time with you, and it didn't seem worth it." He swallows, then meets my eye. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah ..." Am I, though? Here we are, two dumb kids thinking we know everything about each other when apparently we both have our secrets. "I guess I hid my gay side from you, and you kinda hid your straight side from me."

He chuckles. "Yeah, a bit."

"So if all that happened back in high school, what's her deal *now*?"

Tanner huffs, looking completely lost. "She asked me out about a month ago. Made it clear this time she meant

a date, but I couldn't go, and I got busy with work, and nothing seemed to line up." He flicks an apologetic look my way. "Now you're back, and I told her we needed time to catch up first."

"That sounds like a pretty clear no to me. Think she'll get the message?"

"I dunno ..." He sips his coffee, going all pink again. "She's sort of pretty."

"Is she?" Oops, there's the snappy tone again.

"Mom has pointed out a few times that we'd be good together. Some days I feel like people are just waiting for it to happen. The dating and marriage and little blond kids."

Him talking about a future where he's married with offspring is roughly on the scale of me driving a knife into my chest, carving out my heart, then dropping it into the middle of the table. Dramatic? Why yes, thank you, I am.

He knocks my foot with his. "Relax, Roo. We're not done catching up yet. And even when we're both dating someone, it won't matter."

"Oh yeah? Why's that?" Because I'll be in another fucking state by then?

He turns his attention back to his coffee. "Because you'll always be my number one."

The words come out as a mumble, like a throwaway comment he can easily forget. But it's like he scooped up my heart and stuffed it back behind my ribs, kick-starting it for another day.

Piper drops off breakfast without another word, and while the jealous monster hissing in my gut will never like her, I can't help feeling bad. I know what it's like to want Tanner and have him be completely oblivious. But sorry, lady, he's mine.

Because while we might have little things we've kept from each other, had moments we didn't share, maybe it

was needed. Maybe we needed people outside of each other to realize what we have together.

And I'm going to fight to keep this thing for as long as I can.



CHAPTER NINE
TANNER

Pauly groans from the couch, massaging his belly that's overstuffed with the pasta Jones cooked. His T-shirt has peeled back, showing off the hair running down into his pants.

"Damn, I wish I only had an hour left," Jones says, scrolling through his phone. I'm getting close to the end of my twelve-hour shift, but Pauly and Jones have another twelve hours after that.

Pauly agrees, and I smile, wiping out the pan we used and putting it away. Sure, the shorter shifts are great, but they only serve to remind me I'm not a permanent member of the team.

"Yeah, I'm lucky." It's been a quiet day, and after cleaning the firehouse and both engines, we drove around and conducted hydrant maintenance, before attending a call for a gas leak.

"Plans tonight?" Jones asks, tossing his phone on the coffee table.

I lean against the doorframe. "Something with Roo, I'm guessing."

"How are things going with the best friend?" Pauly asks.

"Good as ever."

"Everything's back to normal then?"

"Yeah, just like it used to be." I wonder what the guys would say if they knew we're sharing a bed. And that Roo's gay. Would they care? Would *I* care if they cared?

“Have either of you ever heard of the Kinsey Scale?” I ask, not sure *why* I’m asking.

“Sure.” Pauly nods, but Jones shakes his head.

“What is it?”

“Eh.” I rub at the old scar on my chin. “About gay and straight people. Anyway, I thought I was the only person who hadn’t heard of it.”

Jones frowns and swings around to look at me. “You gay?”

“What?” I laugh. “Nah, man. Someone I know was explaining it to me.”

“Roo?”

Surprise number two. “W-what? Why?”

“He’s always been into you.” Jones turns back to his phone.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Jones chuckles. “As if you didn’t know.”

“We’re friends,” I say, keeping my voice level. We’ve been dealing with this same closed-minded shit since high school. “Just close friends. It’s not a crime.”

“Yeah, I have so many *close* guy friends.”

“No one’s saying it’s wrong, Tanner.” Pauly sits up from where he’s reclining. “He’s being a dick.”

Jones pulls a face at his phone as Pauly picks up a pen and tosses it at his head. “We can all admit it’s weird, though, right?” Jones says.

Pauly is five years older than me, so he wouldn’t remember from school, but Jones definitely would. Being a year older, he’d know exactly how Roo and I were. Still are. Whatever.

“Why is it weird?” Again, my voice stays level.

“He used to follow you everywhere. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had *Royce Everett* all over his notebooks and shit, like the girls used to do.”

“Awesome talk.” I whack him on the back of the head on my way past and throw myself into the spare armchair. Pauly resumes rubbing his stomach, and Jones sinks into his chair, letting his eyes fall closed. The whole time, I try not to pay too much attention to what Jones said.

Royce Everett.

I shake it from my head as I pull out my phone. There’s a text from Roo, and my excitement kicks up for a second before I read it.

Roo: *At the bar with Circus. Meet us here?*

“Guess I’m going to the bar after work.”

“On a Wednesday?” Pauly asks.

“Roo and Circus are there.”

“*Circus.*” Jones snorts. “What kind of a name is *Circus*, anyway?”

“What kind of a name is *Jones*?” Pauly fires back.

“Everyone knows that dude is weird. I mean, people say he lives right on the trails, but have you ever seen a house out there? I sure haven’t.” Jones picks up the pen and lobs it back. “Sure you should go, Tanner? They might be on a *date*. You don’t want to crash that, do you?”

A ... *date*? Normally I’m slow on the uptake, but even so, it takes me an embarrassingly long time to realize he could have a point. Roo is gay, Circus is pan ... *Are* they on a date? My gut twists painfully.

“Nah, they said to meet them. It’s fine.” Fine. Totally fine.

Still, the next hour slips by in painfully slow increments, and just before it’s time to head out, we get a call to check on a precarious power pole down near Payto’s tree farm. It’s a non-event, but by the time we get

things roped off and an electrical maintenance team out, it's another hour past my finish time.

We get back to the station, and I change out of my uniform as quickly as I can. The bar is only a block away, and I suddenly *really* feel like a drink, so I leave my car behind and figure I'll walk back home with Roo.

The bar is busy for a Wednesday, but I immediately spot Roo and Circus. That gross, twisty feeling hits me again, making me pick up my pace as I weave around the few people separating us.

They're at a tiny two-seater table, and Roo's back is to me, so he hasn't seen me yet. And like it always does when he's around, my heart feels full.

I grab Roo's chair and drag it out from the table. "Hop up."

"Hey, Tanner." Circus eyes me as I drop into the chair Roo vacated and pull him down onto one thigh. It's more awkward than it used to be—not to mention he's bigger now—but like with everything else, I assume it'll take time.

"Your round?" I grin at Circus, who rolls his gray eyes, pushes away from the table, and leaves.

Roo shifts so his legs rest between mine. "Long day?"

"Just quiet."

"I'm glad."

"*I'm* not." I link my arm around his waist as he props his elbow on the table and rests his chin on his palm. "I'm not saying I want a full-blown inferno, but enough call outs to keep us busy would be nice."

"Yeah," Circus says, sliding the tray of beers onto the table. "God forbid Sunbury's golden boy takes a breather."

"What's the point of that?"

"*Some* people like to recharge." He arches a long, dark eyebrow in my direction. "Especially when they have a cute man in their bed every night."

My pulse kicks up at the word *cute*. “No problem there.” I pinch Roo’s side, and he smirks at me over his shoulder. “This ‘cute man’ sleeps sixteen hours a day. I barely see him.”

“Please. You’re the one who works all the time.”

“Someone’s gotta pay the rent.”

He drives a bony elbow into my ribs. “We *both* pay, asshole. And the rent is next to nothing.”

I hum as I rest my forehead against his shoulder, letting my eyes fall closed. The need for a beer has evaporated now that I’m here.

“Circus!”

I jolt and twist a little to see Jules hurry over. She’s carrying shopping bags, and Circus immediately perks up at her appearance.

“Here we go,” Roo mutters.

Jules grabs a chair from the table beside us, and Circus points to her. “See, that’s what most people do when there aren’t enough seats.”

Roo turns. Catches my eye. “Did you even think of that?”

“Seems excessive to me.”

Jules laughs. “Having your own chair is excessive now, is it?”

“Waste not, want not, and all that.”

“Next you’re going to be telling us it’s a fire hazard to have so many of these darn wooden chairs.”

“Well, it is. They’re practically kindling.”

“But two people to one chair is an evacuation hazard,” Roo adds.

My mouth drops open at him joining in with them. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“Oh yeah? Says who?”

“Says ...” I splutter. “Says always.”

Jules taps her chin with one pale-pink fingernail. “He’s right. I think this is the first time ever that you haven’t backed him up. Normally you’re like twins who share a brain.”

I snort. “Don’t you guys usually say it’s like we’re dating? Now we’re related. I’m concerned for you, because that’s creepy as hell.” I reach for my beer and take a long drink while Jules pulls something out of her bag.

“I got the plum one.” Her little squeal makes me jump, but Circus scoots closer.

“Hell yeah, let me see.”

And then I sit there and watch one of my closest friends put lipstick on one of my other *male* friends. I’ve never seen Circus wear makeup before, but when he reaches up to drag his longish hair back, I can kinda see why he’d want to.

“Roo?” Jules holds out the lipstick, and my hand automatically grips his waist tighter.

“Nah, not my thing.” I’m not sure if I’m disappointed or not, but then Roo continues, “Tanner will, though.”

I scoff. “Tanner will *not*.”

But he takes the lipstick anyway and turns around to face me. He clasps my face with one hand and holds the lipstick up menacingly. “Let’s see who’s a pretty boy.”

“I swear to God, Roo.”

“What was that?” He tilts his head toward me like he’s struggling to hear, and I get a noseful of his shampoo. His shampoo that smells like peaches and always fills my shower when he’s done in the bathroom. “Pucker up, buttercup.”

With a groan, I stop trying to pull my head back and relax. Roo smiles the moment he works out I’ve given in, and the next second, the thick crap is being smeared across my lips. The way his eyes light up tells me I look ridiculous.

When Roo pulls away, Circus starts to laugh. “Plum is not your color, man.”

“Duly noted.” I keep sipping on my beer, hoping it will come off, but by the end of the night it’s still smearing over everything.

We walk back home, Roo taking every opportunity to tease me the whole way there. He’s a little unsteady on his feet, and after a few beers, I’m probably not the most stable either.

“Catch up, princess.” He laughs as we turn onto our block.

“Why are you giving *me* so much shit but didn’t say a word to Circus?”

“Because he wears makeup all the time.”

“He does?” My feet stagger to a stop. “How much have I missed?”

“You aren’t a very observant human, are you?”

“Apparently not.”

He tugs at my shirt and gets me moving again. “Come on, can’t have a pretty girl like you walking the streets at night.”

I pull a long-suffering inhale through my nose. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Says the fireman wearing lipstick.”

He laughs again as we enter our building, and I follow him into the elevator, where I get a first look at my face.

“Holy fuck, you let me out in public like this?”

He presses the button to our floor. “I love you no matter how you look.”

“Well, you *should* since it’s your fault I look this way.”

“You’re welcome, Princess Peach.”

We get to our floor, and the doors open.

“Prepare to die.” I growl.

Roo darts out ahead of me. He’s struggling with the lock when I catch up, and just as I get my hands on him, the door swings open and he ducks out of my hold again.

“You let me walk around in front of people, looking like a dickhead.”

“You *do* look like a dickhead.”

I lunge for him, and he laughs, quickly sidestepping me until the couch is between us. “You’re gonna regret this.”

“You shouldn’t frown, you know. Why don’t you try smiling for Daddy?”

“Call yourself *daddy* again, and I’ll throw up on this couch.”

“And? It’s *your* couch.”

“Which you will be sleeping on.”

“You’re trying to be tough like I don’t know you.”

“How’s this for tough?” I jump at him and grab hold of his shirt before he can sidestep me. He wriggles out of my grip, but I grab his shoulder, then manage to clamp my arm around his waist. Roo doesn’t give in easily, and we wrestle for a moment before I swipe out his legs and pin him to the couch. I yank up his shirt and press my mouth to his back, over and over, until there’s dark-purple smears all across his skin.

“Tanner, you ass!” He bucks under me, unbalancing us both, and we topple to the floor. I scramble back on top of him before he can get away. With my forearms pinning his chest and my leg holding down his thighs, he’s not going anywhere.

“Nice try, grasshopper.”

He growls out a garbled noise that gets lost in his laugh. “You’re cheating.”

“You can add that to the *changed* column, then.” I press my lips hard against his cheek and pull away,

leaving a giant plum lip mark. “Now who’s the pretty girl?”

He struggles beneath me as I cover his forehead, his nose, then bypass his beard and start on his neck. Asshole is going to pay for me looking like a clown all night.

“Okay, Tanner, seriously, that’s *enough*.” His laughing has died down, and I pull away a little at his tone.

“Shit, am I hurting you?”

“No, just ...” He squeezes his eyes closed.

Then I feel it.

His dick growing hard against my hip, lengthening between us, and I glance down, completely dumbstruck at the feel of it.

“Get *off*.”

I throw myself to the side, still feeling brain-dead. Roo sits up, and the tent in his pants flashes at me a moment before he draws up his knees.

“Roo, did you ...?”

“Can we drop it?”

For some reason I feel the need to laugh. I’m staring at where his groin was a second before, and I swear I can still feel it against me. And the more I try to forget the feeling, the more it’s imprinting in my brain. “You got a boner.”

The tension gets thicker, stronger, as my mouth gets dryer.

Then Roo starts to laugh. “What the hell did you think would happen?”

“What?”

“I’m *gay*. I was being held down by a hot guy who was kissing my neck.”

I blink. “Hot?”

“Shut up.” He shoves me lightly. “God, this is so awkward.”

“What? No. Fuck no. No awkwardness.”

He gives me a look, and okay, I’m being a little awkward.

I get it. But I also can’t really work out what I’m feeling right now. *Is this awkwardness?* “It’s not like we haven’t seen each other’s boners before.” We’ve just never gotten hard *over each other* before.

Oh God. I made Roo hard.

I made Roo hard.

We manage to laugh it off as we get up and go to clean up the mess of lipstick. I have to help Roo get it all off his back, and when we go change, he leaves the room and I’m one hundred percent, definitely not picturing his ass.

Because that would be weird.

Still, when we finally switch out the lights and climb into bed, I don’t fall right asleep. By the sound of Roo’s breathing, he hasn’t either. But I can’t lighten the mood, or start some bullshit conversation, because knowing me, I’d open my mouth and say exactly what was racing through my mind.

I made Roo hard.

And I can’t get the feel of it out of my head.



CHAPTER TEN
Roo

The first thing I notice when I wake is that I've got the blankets gripped tightly to my chest, because the human furnace behind me is conspicuously missing. While most mornings that would be cause for alarm, all I can feel is relief.

Last night, things got weird. So far I've managed to do well at keeping a little distance between us, but the lap-sitting, the kissing fight ... I shiver at the memory of his lips skimming over my body. Was it a surprise to literally anyone that I got hard?

It's exactly *zero* surprise to me that I want to do it again. And again.

But I can't keep springing spontaneous wood over Tanner. That's a definite way to make things awkward fast.

No. It can't happen again. And to ensure I keep things PG, I need to go out and work it out of my system.

I know of a few gay bars in Portland, but I have no idea if there's anything closer. Sunbury is a fat no for the gay scene, but I'm not that keen to travel ninety miles so a random guy can pant all over my junk.

I groan and bury my face in the pillow. Which, of course, still smells like Tanner.

"Good morning." The curtains are ripped open.

With a grunt, I slide the pillow from under my face and yank it down over my eyes. Douche.

"Come on, *Royce*."

Ooh, he first-named me.

He tears the blankets off, and I scramble into a ball to maintain as much body heat as possible. “Why do you hate me?”

He takes longer than usual to answer. “There’s a lot to do around town. I figured you could come and help today.”

“Oh, Tanner, it’s like you don’t know me at all.”

His warm laugh makes me smile. I quickly push it away because this isn’t a situation I’m happy about.

A hand closes over my ankle, and I’m yanked from beneath my protective pillow to the foot of the bed. Before I’ve had a moment to blink the room into focus, Tanner hauls me to my feet. A garbled noise escapes me, which makes him laugh again.

“English, please?”

“Why are you torturing me?” I find my phone on the side table, and my eyes almost fall out when I check the time. “*Ten* a.m.?”

“You might just be visiting, but this isn’t a vacation. I’m gonna make you fall in love with this town again.”

I stifle a yawn behind my hand, my sleepiness made worse by knowing the ungodly time. “I was never in love with this town.”

“Then there’s a first time for everything.” His big hand drops onto my shoulder, and he steers me out of the room to the bathroom. “Now do what you gotta do and get a move on. Ms. Rasserman needs a tree removed.”

“And Sunbury doesn’t have any tree ... *removers* to do it for her?”

“She doesn’t need a tree remover when she’s got us.”

I pout. I *know* it’s unattractive, but watch me not give a shit. “I’m not built for physical labor.”

Tanner grins, then reaches up to give my bicep a squeeze. “Actually, that one is already on the *changed* column. Don’t think I haven’t noticed these muscles you’ve sprouted. I may be unobservant, but I’ve still got eyes.”

“Okay.” The word falls out of my mouth without my permission. All I know is he needs to stop squeezing my arm like that and back up *now* before I stick him in the leg with something he never needs to feel again.

His thumb rubs gently over my bicep, and the few inches between us burn with energy. I want to press closer. Thankfully, I’m smarter than that and move back instead.

“There we go.” He pats my shoulder. “I’ll put the coffee on. It’s going to be a long day.”

He’s not kidding. When Tanner left the house in joggers and a T-shirt, I thought it was him being impervious to the cold as usual. But now we’re here, I’m regretting the extra layers. My jacket and sweatshirt have already come off, and my undershirt is bunched to the elbows. There’s sweat in places there definitely shouldn’t be sweat, and after the constant tying and untying of ropes, my hands are burning in the cool air.

There is one giant highlight to this shithole of a morning, though. Seeing Tanner shirtless, in low-slung joggers, coated in sweat as he tears a chainsaw through each tree limb. The sawdust is caked to his skin, but for some reason, the filth—and hell, even the safety glasses—are really doing it for me. I’ve been half hard since this whole thing started.

Ooh boy. My best friend is sexy as fuck.

“All right, give that rope a pull,” Tanner yells down to me. He swipes at his forehead as I yank on the rope, wishing I was giving something else a pull.

And there I go again. Damn, I need to get laid. Rubbing one out in the shower isn't scratching that itch at the moment.

With a prolonged *creak*, the final tethers holding the branch in place groan and snap, and it drops to the ground in a loud rustle of leaves.

“Nearly done!”

We've got two branches left and the top of the trunk. It's not like the tree is enormous, but it's far bigger than I think we should be taking on by ourselves. Tanner ties off the top portion of the trunk, and the loud motor of the chainsaw fills the air again.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Keeping one hand on the rope, I check my messages.

Circus: *Try Stokers in Port Welling. It has a good vibe. Otherwise, there's Monster Ball and the Deb just this side of Portland.*

Port Welling is maybe a twenty-minute drive out of Sunbury, so a Lyft there and back shouldn't be too expensive. I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek as I slip my phone away and look back up at Tanner. His back glistens with sweat, muscles tightening under his skin as he drags the chainsaw through the surprisingly thick trunk.

Do not make a joke about thick trunks.

It takes another forty-five minutes to finish up, and when we're done, Ms. Rasserma brings us fresh lemonade, which I force myself to drink out of politeness. Any kind of lemonade that doesn't include bubbles has no right existing in my opinion.

“Thank you, boys,” she coos, looking up at Tanner. “You're too good for this town.”

“Nah, it's not hard to help out. Right, Roo?”

“Exactly. I love spending my free time doing manual labor.”

She smiles at me while Tanner tries to keep a straight face. Thank God he’s the only one who can tell when I’m talking out of my ass.

It takes us way too much small talk, and me way too many inappropriate thoughts before we finally escape, and when we get into the car, it’s no better. The smell of sawdust and Tanner’s sweat is making me light-headed, and after I suggest he takes the first shower, by the time I climb in, his body wash is all I can smell.

With a quiet groan, I give in to yet another unsatisfying jerk-off session before washing the mess off the shower wall and pulling on some sweats and a hoodie.

“I’m gonna cook a risotto for dinner, then head out for groceries. Want me to cook enough for you?” He’s not looking at me as he searches the small kitchen for everything he needs, and for some reason, guilt makes me shift uncomfortably.

“Don’t worry about me for dinner.”

He glances up. “You won’t be here?”

“I was thinking of heading out for a few hours. Want to watch a movie or something until then?”

My question doesn’t seem to register, since he asks, “Meeting up with Circus again?”

“Nope. Heading out on my own.”

He laughs. It doesn’t sound natural. “You don’t want me to come too?”

I drop back on the couch, watching him. “This isn’t somewhere you want to go. Trust me.”

“Oh *really*?” He folds his arms and leans into the counter between us. “I’m interested now.”

“Nothing interesting. Just a run-of-the-mill gay bar.” My voice hitches on the last two words, and I remind myself again that I’m not doing anything wrong. In fact,

if Tanner and I were together, I wouldn't even *need* to go to a gay bar in the first place. We're friends, and sure, we used to do everything together, but it doesn't mean we still have to.

"A gay bar?" He looks like I've hit him in the face with a frying pan. "And you don't want me to come?"

I bury my face in my hands. "Oh God, you're going to make me spell it out for you, aren't you?"

"You're going to find a hookup." It isn't a question.

"I ... want to go for a drink." Because it's not as if I can tell him how desperately I need to get off.

"It's a Thursday night. And Ugly's is open."

"A drink and a change of scene, then."

He nods. Once. Again, it doesn't seem like a natural reaction and more like how he thinks he should react.

"You okay?"

"I'll cook you some risotto. I'm sure you'll need it when you get home."

There's a definite tone there, but I can't place exactly what it means. He doesn't sound pissed off or annoyed. It's more that he's trying to tease, but it's coming out wrong. Does that stop my heart from clenching a bit, trying to read into something that isn't there? No, it fucking doesn't. Because my body is a dumbass.

Tanner gets the food on as I flip stupidly through channel after channel that refuse to hold my attention. It's cold, but I'm already planning an outfit that will show off way too much skin, and if the night goes the way I'm intending, someone else's body warmth will heat me up.

He ends up watching a movie with me, and when I remind him he was supposed to be ducking out for groceries, he grunts and crosses his arms. I'm struggling to work out if he's pissed about me going out and not inviting him, or the fact that I've got a life he's not involved in. If it's the second one, I'll be annoyed, but I

can't help feeling weirdly happy about how grumpy he's being. I decide to wait until later to go out, so we eat dinner together with me chatting away happily as he answers me in verbal Morse code. I can't drop my smile.

By nine o'clock, though, I can't leave it any later, and there's no way I can spend another night sleeping next to Tanner's big body. Feeling his heat. Listening to his soft, steady breaths ...

Yep. Time to go.

"Okay, I'm getting ready."

"Really?" His voice squeaks. "I didn't realize you were still going."

"Yeah. It's something you need to time right. Too early, and it looks desperate. Too late, and all the hot guys are gone."

His cheeks flush as he gets up and trails me to my bedroom. "Tell me more about these gay bars."

"What do you want to know?"

"I dunno. *You're* supposed to be educating me."

I laugh. "Ah, but gay bars are like *Fight Club*. You have to be in on the secret for me to talk about it."

He flops down on the floor, legs sprawled out in front of him, leaning on his hands, as I open the closet and peer inside. "Okay, then. I'll come."

I freeze. The words were tossed out casually, like he doesn't care whether I agree or not, but I know he cares.

And so do I.

The last thing I want is to head there with Tanner and leave with someone else, but if he's there, and everyone is dancing, maybe I could suggest we dance too ... My skin tingles at the thought of being pressed close to him.

"Ah, probably not a great idea."

"Why?"

A groan gets caught in my throat. “There’ll be things there you really don’t want to see.”

“Like?”

“Like men hooking up.” Among other things. “And no, you can’t just go and stare at the women together.”

His face blanches. “Why would I wanna do that?”

Oh dear, sweet Tanner. I know he has Internet on his phone, and given he’s male and has net connectivity, surely he would have worked out how to access porn on that thing. “No reason.”

I start pulling out outfit choices and changing in front of the mirror Jules must have left hanging on the closet door.

“Bit cold.”

“It’ll be hot in the bar.”

His reflection narrows its eyes a little as he says, “You can dress me, then.”

“Do you see me right now?” I spin to face him and pluck the tight, sheer black shirt I’m wearing. “You want *me* to dress you?”

He looks like he’s about to change his mind, but then sets his jaw. “Sure, I’m game.”

“I’m going to warn you now, if you go in there dressed like you’re ready to pick up, you *will* find yourself surrounded by men ready to bend over for you.” I stifle a laugh as his eyes widen and a blush creeps up his neck.

“That’s, umm ...”

“Only trying to prepare you.”

And scare him. Because if Tanner comes, it’s going to make hooking up real hard. Then other things will be hard, making my need to hook up worse.

He stands up and steps closer, and I almost choke on air when he rests a hand casually on my hip and leans

around me to reach into the closet. He pulls out a shirt and holds it up against his chest. "Suit me?"

"Fishnet?" I laugh and take it from him. "Absolutely not." There's no way I want a bunch of horny gay men catching sight of his body. Nope. I'll be the only one inappropriately gawking at those muscles.

"Here." I hand him a printed button-up that will be obscenely tight on him, and he finally backs up a step. "Leave the top three buttons open."

He peels off his sweater and drops it on the floor. I watch shamelessly. All that muscle, the blond hair sprinkled over his wide chest ...

"Ah, Roo ...?"

I tear my eyes away from his body, and glance up to find his blush even darker. "That's a whole lot of man chest," I breathe.

Tanner laughs and quickly shrugs into my shirt before leaning in close. "And it's only the *second* most impressive thing about me."

Oh, dear God, I need to get laid.

I pray Tanner doesn't notice my semi as I kick out of my pants and pull on bright green shorts. I send Tanner to find his own pants since none of mine will fit, and then check that my hair is covering my scar.

When Tanner reappears, in my shirt, black shorts, and white canvas shoes, I can't stop my gaze from dipping down and taking him in. My hands are itching to slide over his chest.

I clear my throat and tell him to take his ID and phone, trying to ignore the way my heartbeat is getting louder in my ears as we leave.

His arm brushes my shoulder as he switches off the living room light, and then he rests his big hand on my lower back, guiding me through the darkness to the door.

His aftershave is strong and woody, and I'm about a second away from turning my head and pressing it into

his neck.

“I cannot believe this is where our night has headed,” I say, stepping out of the warm apartment into the cold hall.

“Neither can I. But is it weird that I’m a little excited?”

I look up to find him watching me steadily.
“Excited?”

“Of course. I’ve never seen guys be affectionate with each other. Other than you and me, I don’t know any who are. And I mean, I’m not gay, obviously, but ... I dunno, sometimes ...”

For fuck’s sake, Tanner, do *not* leave me hanging.
“Yeah?”

He swallows. “Sometimes I feel like *we’re* the weird ones.” He breaks eye contact. “Like maybe we shouldn’t be close the way we are. Like maybe people watch us and say things because it’s not okay.”

My jaw drops. “What? Since when do you think that?”

“Since always.”

Pain punches my gut. “You’ve never said anything.”

“Never needed to.” He clears his throat. “Either way, I’m not changing. Maybe it *is* weird, maybe we shouldn’t be so close, or touch so much, or share a bed. I don’t know, Roo.” He sucks in a large breath. “All I know is *not* doing those things doesn’t feel right.”

I stare at him. Every word falling past his lips goes further toward cementing what I’ve been feeling for him for longer than I can place. “I feel the same way.”

His smile lights up the brown in his eyes. “So that’s what I meant. Even if all the guys there tonight are only trying to get laid, it’ll be a good eye-opener for me.”

Before I’ve registered moving, I step forward and wrap my arms around Tanner’s waist. His response is automatic, instinctual, like this moment was always

waiting to happen. And as his arms close around me, I'm engulfed in his heat. For one wild moment, I'm about to suggest we head back inside and watch another movie. But Tanner needs to see this, and even though the *want* to hook up has long since left me, I really *need* to be touched.

So I let myself enjoy the hug for another moment before I step away again, severing the connection between us.

Because feeling anything for Tanner right now is going to make tonight harder than it needs to be. This isn't about feelings; it's about scratching an itch.

So why am I starting to feel so rotten?

CHAPTER ELEVEN
TANNER

I wouldn't say I'm nervous. Not exactly. There's a weird energy pulsing through to my limbs that's making my knees bounce. My lips are a bit dry too. My heartbeat a little fast.

It's just a gay club, I remind myself for maybe the hundredth time. We'll grab a drink, Roo can go do whatever he needs to do, and I'll people-watch. Because he can say he's not going to hook up all he likes, but I know him too well. I know how his nose twitches when he lies, or the way he sometimes catches that freckle on his lip between his teeth when he's debating something.

And it's fine. I'll leave him alone while he does whatever, and I'll be there to make sure he gets home safely.

My hands tighten a little more on the steering wheel as I struggle to swallow.

It takes under twenty minutes to get there, and even less time to find a parking spot and be let into the redbrick building. Unlike the bar in Sunbury, there are no windows to see inside, and as Roo leads the way down a flight of stairs, it's obvious why.

The bar is a far cry from the Ugly Mug. And for a Thursday, it's packed. Well, at least for a small bar, there are a lot of people here.

"The lights won't be a problem, will they?" I ask him.

Roo shakes his head. "If I can party my way across Europe, I think I can handle anything Port Welling throws at me."

A DJ thumps obnoxious music into the room from the far side, behind a wall of gyrating people. Roo steers me toward the bar, and I barely register the walk over. If I thought Roo's shirt was pure advertisement for the lean body he's built since we were teens, what some of these other people are wearing is practically pornographic.

Though, having never been in a club, I have nothing to compare this to.

A guy brushes past me with a shirt barely long enough to be called a shirt. It covers his shoulders and nipples and nothing else. A woman at a tall table by the bar is wearing a fishnet top similar to the one I looked at earlier and no bra, and it takes me a full two seconds of staring at her tits before I realize I'm staring. I hurry to look away, and Roo catches my eye. He smirks and pushes me up to the bar, closing me in with his body.

"Eye-opening?" he asks by my ear. His arms hold the bar on either side of my waist, chest flush against my back.

"It's definitely something," I mutter, flagging down the bartender.

My heart still hasn't remembered its usual rhythm, and the distracting beat has my nerves on high alert.

He pushes his lips to my ear, and my lungs work overtime to suck in the warm air. "Remember, no staring at the women. Most aren't interested anyway."

"Can I stare at the men?"

His mouth opens and closes a couple of times. "That's what we're here for."

Our drinks are set down in front of me, and after tapping my card, I spin in Roo's arms. "Better give the people what they want."

Our eyes catch. He doesn't back up. "No breaking any poor gay hearts tonight, Tanner. Sweet, *straight* men are like kryptonite for some of us."

I swallow, but a weird burst of confidence makes me step in closer. "Does that make you Superman, then?"

“That would imply you make me weak.”

I can't drop his stare. Not until his tongue darts out and swipes over his lip, over the freckle. Then I can't look away from there either.

Roo's hand wraps around his drink, and he finally steps back and leads me across the room. The music is louder by the dance floor, and I can barely hear the thoughts twisting through my brain. I can't peg what it is, but whenever Roo says the word *straight*, I want to argue the point.

Which is crazy, since I'm not gay. I have one hundred percent confirmed sex with women does it for me. But ... I glance around the room at the people here, all of them so different, and it occurs to me I've *only* ever really taken notice of women.

My palm feels clammy against the cool condensation of my beer glass.

Where better than here to do a little test?

Trying not to be obvious about it, I turn my attention to the men on the dance floor. There are hard jawlines, flexing abs, corded necks, and round asses. My gaze dips farther on one of the guys right by us, and I give myself a second to take in the curve of his calf muscle. I've always liked calf muscles.

I quickly look away, feeling a little hot in the cheeks as I hurriedly take a gulp of my beer. Roo is watching the dancers too, and I find myself wondering what his type is.

“Anyone catch your interest?”

His hazel eyes flick back to me, and he nods off to the left. “Big guy over there.”

I follow his gaze to find a blond man made of pure muscle. I can confidently say I don't find him attractive in the slightest, and I'm not sure what Roo sees in him.

“Not good enough for you.”

Roo laughs. “I’m not here for a life partner, Tanner. I just want someone who’ll get on his knees.”

My cock twitches. I ignore it. “What makes you think *he* will?”

“I’m basically a lumberjack. You showed me today how to bring down a tree. Rope him, and give a good *tug*.”

I cringe at the mental imagery. Roo with *anyone* isn’t something I want to picture.

“You’re sizing him up pretty hard,” Roo says. “Yes, big tough men like him can be gay too.”

“I wasn’t thinking that at all.”

“Uh-huh.” He runs his fingers over his hair, checking it’s in place. “Hold this for me?”

His drink is in my hand before I can object. “What are you—”

“Give me half an hour, and I’ll be done.”

“Ah.” My throat suddenly feels thick. “So you *are* here to hook up.”

“I’m going for a little dance. If I disappear for fifteen minutes, don’t come looking.” He winks, walking backward toward the dance floor. I have an overwhelming urge to grab hold of him and pull him back, but I resist. My gut turns over itself as I finish my beer.

Roo walks right over to the guy he was sizing up, and a second later they’re dancing together.

Or ... Well, that’s definitely more than dancing. He turns Roo and pulls him back against his chest as Roo’s hands link around the man’s thick neck.

Because my beer is finished, I drink the rest of Roo’s Scotch too. It burns, but even the harsh taste isn’t enough to dislodge the lump in my throat. Roo’s eyes are closed, lips parted, and I can’t tear my eyes away from his face.

Or the way the human fucking tree reaches up to tweak one of Roo's nipples. A bolt of lust spears me right in the groin, at the same time as my jaw clamps tight.

My body thrums with the need to walk over there and yank that asshole away from Roo. He's *my* best friend. He's *my* ... Well, he's *mine*. So yeah, it's totally normal to feel murderous when someone else has his attention. When their hands tighten on his hips and their teeth catch his ear.

"Hey, cutie." A pretty guy with dark roots and bleached hair blocks my view.

"I'm straight." I activate the words like a shield, hoping to get this guy to move on.

He lifts a drawn-on eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Very so."

"Hmm ..."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." His pretty lips close over his straw. And I'm noticing them. His lips. A *man's* lips. "I've never seen a straight guy staring so hard at a bunch of dancing gays."

"I'm not staring."

"Sure you're not."

Well, I'm not *now*. Not since he blocked my view. "I'm here with my best friend."

He laughs. "*Best?* What is this, high school?"

"If it were, it'd be simpler," I mutter.

"And now you're growling." He *finally* steps aside, following my line of sight. "Well, I highly doubt you're checking out the wannabe-German-aerobics-instructor, so I'm going to put my money on the cute guy he's dancing with."

My mouth goes dry. Roo takes that exact moment to look over, and we stare at each other for a beat before the

guy next to me slings an arm around my neck and runs a finger down my face.

“What are you doing?” I gasp as he turns me so my back is to Roo.

“Helping you.”

“With?”

He glances over my shoulder. “He’s watching.”

“*Who* is?”

“Wow, you sure are slow on the uptake. Move your hips.”

“Umm ...”

“Dance. Show that man of yours you have moves.”

Still not completely caught up, but at least sure the guy doesn’t seem to be hitting on me, I try to relax and move a little to the music.

“That’s better.” He glances over my shoulder again. “Oh, he’s even stopped dancing. Now, what is happening between you two?”

“Me and Roo?” I go to look back, but the guy grabs my face.

“First rule of making someone jealous: never look. Second is: grab my ass.”

“Yeah, I’m not doing that.”

He laughs, straight teeth flashing at me. “A guy can try. He wouldn’t see anyway. But he *would* see if I grabbed your ass. All I need is permission, and I guarantee he’ll be over here in a second flat.”

“You think?”

“I know. But the question is, do you want that?”

Did I? I feel my forehead wrinkle up under the force of my confusion. Yeah, I want to get Roo away from that guy, but what happens when I do? He finds some other guy to dance with? What’s the point?

“Better decide soon, honey. Big Bad is putting the moves on him.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“I get to dance with a ‘straight’ hottie.” He winks. “And once your man is back where he belongs, there’ll be a horned-up man mountain I can make a move on. Like *your* guy, I have a thing for big and blond.”

I swallow. “Okay.” I don’t mean for my voice to come out so husky, but he doesn’t give me a chance to rethink. As soon as I agree, his hands close over my ass, and he squeezes hard.

“*Tanner?*”

I jump at Roo’s voice, surprised to find him already beside me.

“Bye, honey.” The guy’s hands leave my ass, and he brushes a kiss over my cheek and darts off.

“Roo ... I thought you were—”

“What the hell are you doing?” Roo cuts in.

“Dancing?”

“Dancing? With a man?”

“Isn’t that what guys do in these places?”

He looks like he doesn’t know whether to laugh or smack me about the head.

For some reason, seeing the indecision pulls at my lips. “So come on.”

“Wha—”

I grab Roo’s hand and pull him toward the dance floor. I’m not sure what he thinks of this, because I’m not even really sure what *I* think of this. All I know is I wanna dance with Roo, and I’m not thinking about it more than that.

“This is ... different,” he says as I wrap my arms around him.

“Not like it’s the first time we’ve danced together.”

He immediately smiles, and I'm glad, because that's what the memory of prom does to me too. We'd all technically gone as one big friendship group, but Leon was with Dahlia, Rafe and Laura had just gotten back together, and Circus took some girl he then disappeared on early. So it was Roo and me. And I swear, it was like no one else existed that night.

I'd known our days together were numbered, and I'd known that once he left, things would change forever. I'd also known that when we danced like the other couples—despite laughing and joking like dickheads—people were watching. Judging. But by that point, I didn't care. By that point, I was too focused on the fact that it was my last chance to have fun with him.

And tonight I'm doing what my eighteen-year-old self would have wanted me to. I run my hands over his back and draw him in close.

"Tanner, what are you doing?" He buries his face into my shoulder.

"I just wanna dance with my Roo."

He laughs and looks up, hazel eyes meeting mine. "Your Roo?"

It sounds even better coming from him. "Yes." I touch my forehead to his. "And I'm your Tanner."

"My Tanner."

"Are you gonna repeat everything I say?"

"Sorry, I'm ..." His smile unleashes, and he presses his body against mine, hands snaking around to grab my ass. "If you're mine, I guess I can do this. Since apparently you'll let any guy."

I swallow roughly. "I guess you can."

He leans in, beard scraping my jaw as his lips rest against my ear. "You can grab mine too, you know."

Right. Because it's not weird. Because we're best friends, and we're in a gay club, and we're dancing together. My nerves are thrumming as I skim my hands

lower, over the round globes of his ass, until it rests in my palms. My hands squeeze without permission.

God, it's so round. I let out a shaky breath, feeling every line of his body as it moves against mine. Our shirts are sticking to us with sweat from the heat of the club, but I don't let him back up. His legs slot between mine, and the friction of his thigh against my crotch is too much for me.

Roo's breathy laugh hits my ear. "Always trying to rub it up against me, aren't you, big guy?"

"I, ah ..." I try to shift my hips back as my cheeks grow warm, but Roo tightens his grip on my ass.

"Don't worry about it. Think of it as an occupational hazard of coming to a gay club." Then he rocks his hips forward, pressing his erection against my leg.

Oh, *shit*.

I stumble back a step even as my body screams to get closer. "Okay, umm, well ..." I pretend to air out my shirt. "I think I'm all danced out. Are you"—I gesture at the men around us—"done, or ..."

Roo narrows his eyes as he adjusts himself, drawing my attention to the noticeable bulge in his shorts.

I snap my gaze away again, even as my heartbeat starts to thrum in my ears.

"I guess I am."

"You *guess*, or you *are*?"

"I am." He grabs my hand and starts to lead me away from the dance floor. I can't help watching the way his ass moves, silently kicking myself that I put an end to things so quickly.

But I need to get out of here.

This place has messed with my head, and clearly, I'm suffering from oxygen deprivation down here or something.

"You want to go?" he asks.

“I think I’ve seen what I needed to.” Which is a total understatement, but I’m at the point where I can’t take anything else in. I’m standing here, half hard over my *best friend*.

That’s a mind fuck all of its own, and even noticing his collarbones, the ridges of his pecs, is making me feel pervy and kind of gross. “Actually, I really need to go.”

He doesn’t question me. Just squeezes my hand tighter and holds it the whole way back to the car.

CHAPTER TWELVE
ROO

It's official: my dick hates me. Though, to be fair, I hate the traitorous little fucker right back. Last night was a total bust. Between how gross I felt dancing with that guy when all I could picture was Tanner behind me, and then yet another dissatisfying jerk-off session, I'm getting desperate.

The drive home was painful. Then trying to fall asleep, acutely aware of Tanner lying there awake, was nearly impossible.

My dick has decided only one man will do. And it's currently straining in his direction.

"Morning," Tanner mutters. He's frowning at his phone, and the fact that he's still in bed indicates it really *must* be morning. Grumbling, I fish my phone from the side table and glare at the offensive number.

"Eight o'clock?" My voice pitches higher. "Why are we awake?"

Tanner laughs as I bury my face into the pillows, squashing my erection beneath me.

"I haven't really been asleep," he says.

"*Urg*. Why?" I quickly push up onto my elbows so I can see him properly. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"Well, I'm convinced." Tanner's not wearing a shirt, and it's taking a whole lot of effort not to stare at his chest. "Seriously, what's up?"

"Been thinking."

“About?”

“Last night.”

Oh, dear God, sure, don't give me details or anything. The memory of his thick cock pressed up against me kept dipping in and out of my dreams all night. “*And?*”

“And ... I dunno.”

I stare at him blankly. “You don't know. You've been thinking ... and you don't know what about.”

“Correct.” He still hasn't looked away from his phone, but his frown has deepened and his jaw is getting tighter by the second. His lips start to twitch a little, and it's then I realize what's going on.

“I don't care if you read out loud.”

He huffs and runs a hand over his head. “None of it makes sense.”

“What are you trying to read?” I reach for his phone, but he jerks it away from me.

Okay ... “If it's personal, just say so. You don't need to be all jittery.”

“It's not that. I'm a bit embarrassed, okay?”

“About ...?”

He sighs and hands over his phone.

I almost wish he hadn't, because reading the words on the screen sends my heart into overdrive.

How to tell if you're bi.

Nope, I really, really shouldn't have read that. I lock his screen and set the phone down next to mine, buying myself time to get this sudden excitement under control. Swallowing tightly, I pat the pillow next to mine, and he sinks down into it, rolling to his side to face me.

He eyes me warily, the whites of his eyes tinged red and a chunk of short hair flicked up from his cowlick.

I want to smooth it down. I want to kiss away the lines between his eyebrows. I don't.

"You're not going to find an answer to that question online."

His stare dips to the mattress. "I'm so confused."

"I know that feeling. In sophomore year I googled almost the exact same question."

"Really?"

"Yep. And ... I think if you're asking the question, you already have good reason to be."

"So I'm bi." He cringes.

Pain trickles through me at his clear disappointment. "Maybe. Time for more of *That's So Queer*. You *could* be bi. You could also be curious. Now that you know I'm gay, you might just be wondering what all the fuss is about."

He grunts.

"You could be pan, or heteroflexible, or you might be straight and just appreciate *looking* at men." I duck my face until he meets my eyes. "*That's* why the answer won't be online."

"Then how the hell do I know?" Frustration bleeds from his voice.

"You be honest with yourself. I tried to pretend for a long time that I was straight because I thought it would be easier. It wasn't." I brush two fingers over his sternum and walk them up to hover over the left side of his chest. I draw a heart. "Your answers are here ..." I walk my fingers down his torso, until they're over his belly button. "And one other very prominent place." I brush my finger over the hair running down to his briefs, and he quickly snatches up my hand.

"Okay, yep. I get your point." His face flushes so red, it makes me smile.

I link our fingers together. "Whatever you work out, I'm here."

His answering smile is soft, and some of the color ebbs from his cheeks. "I know."

"And whatever you land on *is* okay."

He nods, but I can tell there's more going on in his head than he's saying.

"There's no hurry to figure it out."

A large yawn overtakes him, and he nods again.

"So let's hit pause. You need sleep. You looked wrecked."

"Thanks," he says dryly, then narrows his eyes. "This wouldn't be your way of trying to go back to sleep yourself, would it?"

"Definitely not." I draw a cross over my heart. "I'll even get up and clean the apartment while you nap."

"I'll believe *that* when I see it." He snorts, but his eyes fall closed.

And I lie there watching him until his breathing evens out and his quiet snores start to fill the room.

Wanting nothing more than to curl up against him and fall asleep myself, I force myself out of bed. He's working at the bar tonight, so I figure I'll clean up and attempt to cook dinner that he can take with him, and that way we can spend the afternoon together. Doing ... Well, anything.

Anything that doesn't involve me obsessing over the fact that Tanner is questioning. That, after all these years, there might be the smallest glimmer of hope for me yet.

Because while I'd always *hoped* there might be something more between us, I'd never actually believed it.

And now Tanner ... well, he's making me question too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
TANNER

The heat isn't on when I get home from work the next morning, and I find Roo curled into a ball on his side of the bed, blankets pooled on the floor.

I laugh a little as I pick them up and tuck him in before going and setting the room temperature. It was a quiet shift at the bar, and I'm certainly not about to complain about working in a sleepy town like Sunbury. Still, I grab my shit and go shower more out of habit than anything before climbing into my side of the bed next to Roo.

My side. His side. I'm not sure when staking territory became a thing in *my* bed, but I don't hate it. Roo's bed should be here in about two weeks, so things will go back to normal, but ... sleeping in different rooms has never really been normal for us. And I'm not sure how I'll cope if he really does leave again.

I grab my phone to scroll through social media while I try to convince myself to sleep. If I can get to sleep soon, I'll wake up around the same time as Roo and be alert enough to enjoy spending time with him.

Circus has posted a few times. I pause on a photo of him with insanely long eyelashes captioned with the word *glamour* and wonder how I never noticed the makeup thing before. His other posts are too long for me to attempt to read, so I keep scrolling.

Posts with one or two lines are completely fine. Anything longer than that, I get all mixed up and start to forget what I'd read.

Roo twitches and lets out a weird kind of breath that sets me on high alert.

I drop my phone and push up to look at him.

He's breathing through his mouth and looks as peaceful as when I first walked in, but that sudden twitch has flooded my body with adrenaline. The amount of times I've seen Roo have a seizure has hardwired me to react to the smallest changes with him. He likes to joke about me watching him sleep, but the truth is, I do it a lot. I'm always waiting for the next time.

Our high-school years taught me how to exist on little sleep. His nightly seizures, combined with my early swim practices, made sleep nearly nonexistent.

Thankfully for right now, Roo's body looks relaxed. I let out a trapped breath and lean down to kiss the hair over his scar.

"Morning," Roo murmurs with a tiny smile.

I'm not sure if he's half-awake or sleep-talking, but I kiss him again so he knows I'm here, then settle back on my side of the bed.

I tuck my hands behind my head and look around my shadowy bedroom. I'm naturally a pretty happy person, but this deep contentment coursing through me is extreme even for me. As tempting as it is to drag Roo over for a hug, to share all this happiness with him, I let him sleep and remind myself it can't be like this forever.

In two weeks, he'll be in his own room. Next month ... next year ... I let out a long, measured breath. Seeing him at the club the other night drove home the fact that while I wish Roo were *mine*, he's not actually mine to keep.

I glance back over at where he's snuggled up, and my heart feels warm. It feels *right*. But what does that even mean?

What does it mean when I look at him and see our friendship lasting forever? That I can picture us going halves on a house, and living together so I can hug him

and kiss his hair whenever I want? Where I can make him happy always ...

There's something hot and thick growing in my stomach that makes my mouth dry. That magical, imaginary scenario seems almost too perfect for words, and the thought of it not happening feels like I'm eighteen again and Roo is telling me he's leaving.

Not this time.

This time I will do anything to make sure he stays.

I'm not exactly sure what that means, but I do know that this time around, something's changed. Not only in our list of differences about the other—something inside me has shifted. Now all I want in my future is him. Even if that means committing myself to a life of celibacy, I'd do it.

But ...

I clear my throat and glance in his direction again.

The other night, well, I'd been faced with something about myself that put a few things together. Have I ever identified as anything other than straight? Nope. Truthfully, I've never considered the option. Whenever I found myself staring at the hard chest of a guy on my swim team, or watching a cute guy with a tight ass pass me on the way into the bar, I've always put it down to a weird moment. A blip. A loss of concentration.

But the other night I finally let myself *look*. And my cock *really* liked what it saw.

I rub the rough stubble on my chin as I try to push my swampy thoughts along. If I can get hard over a guy, what would it be like to touch one?

The thought seems too big to be confronted with this early in the morning. It was never a question whether I'd have sex with a woman, so the attraction I felt didn't take me by surprise. This is totally new and makes me a bit uncomfortable to think about.

There's a really quick way to test out if that one night was a fluke, though. Checking Roo's still asleep, I open

my phone and search for gay porn.

I really don't know what I'm looking at here, but as soon as I find a video that catches my interest, I hit Play. I'm not sure what I'm expecting. A boner? That'd be a solid sign.

Except, trying to watch it on low so I don't wake Roo makes it a little hard to concentrate. I switch it off, close my eyes, and instead, picture the club the other night.

The toned bodies, the muscles, the solid jawlines and shaped, hairy calves.

A sheer black shirt stretched over a tight chest.

Toned, freckled legs and a ridiculously round ass.

My dick starts to thicken as the image of Roo's bare ass cheeks flashes through my mind. The feel of his hard cock pressing against me.

Fuck. I reach down to squeeze my erection. The plan had been to see if I was interested, not to get turned on. Though I guess this answers that question.

I swing my legs out of bed and head to the bathroom to take care of my problem. The whole time I'm jerking off, I'm thinking of hazel eyes, light-brown hair, and a mess of freckles under my lips.

I shudder as I come, and almost as soon as I've milked my dick dry, what happened sets in.

Oh *God*.

Did I just jerk off over Roo?

Okay, well, that was unexpected, but it's not like it has to mean anything.

Even knowing that doesn't help convince me to go back into my bedroom. I glimpse the lump under the covers that is Roo, and it makes me feel slimy.

What the hell would he think if he knew the thoughts I'd had?

It was supposed to be a test for men in general. Not ... *him*.

Yet even through the guilt, I can't shake the thought of how it would feel to kiss Roo. To touch him, for real. Not friendly touching—or our version of it—but actually getting more intimate with him than we've ever gone before.

Is that something I'd even want?

And if I did, would Roo be totally disgusted?

After all, it hasn't been me all these years playing the platonic card. Out of the two of us, Roo has definitely been the more vocal.

I head for the living room instead and spread out on the couch.

I know I love Roo. I know I want to make him happy.

But at what point do those feelings cross a line?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
ROO

Tanner hasn't said a thing. Not a single thing about this big bi revelation. I want to ask him where his head is at, but I've also promised myself I'm not going to pry.

Nope. This is for him to figure out on his own.

Why is it so fucking hard?

I don't meddle. I don't stick my nose in other people's business, because I hate when they do that to me. Yet here I am, obsessively focused on one aspect about my best friend, and I kind of hate myself for it.

Only kind of, though.

The rest of me is preoccupied with how to tip his dick-o'-meter from *maybe* to *definitely*.

"Can you fill the tray again?" Tanner asks, gesturing toward the can of paint in the corner. His face is relaxed as he rolls a coat on the walls, and I can't detect any life-changing battles going on inside his head.

This stupid hope won't turn off.

I try not to grumble as I do as Tanner asked. We're spending another Saturday *helping*, and this week we're painting the spare room at the Harveys' place, so it's ready for when Rowan gets back. I can think of a billion other things I'd rather be doing.

I watch the way Tanner's back flexes under his T-shirt as he works, and ... okay, maybe this isn't so bad.

I set some music on my phone to at least break up the quiet, and go back to painting the edges.

"You're doing good," Tanner says.

You know what else is good? My dick.

I hold back my smile. “Not a compliment. Unlike you, I give zero shits about helping people.”

“I’m confident I’ll rub off on you.”

Literally? Please.

Mmm ... Tanner’s big body grinding against mine probably isn’t the smartest thing to be thinking about right now.

“Why do they even need this room painted?” I ask, trying to change the subject. “Rowan’s a grown-ass man. I highly doubt he gives a shit what color the room is.”

“I think it’s sweet that his parents want to do this for him. Sometimes it’s nice to do something for the people you love.”

Like give them head?

Shit, this is becoming a problem.

Fuck it.

I finish the line I’m painting, drop the brush in the tray, and crowd in close behind Tanner. “My back’s sore,” I whine.

“That’s because you’re not used to doing anything physical.”

“Then why are you torturing me?” I hold my breath a little as I slide my hands around his front and bring them to a rest over his abs.

Tanner’s roller slips, sending a streak of gray paint over the previously mint-colored wall, but he corrects it quickly. His back expands with a deep breath, and I smile into his shoulder, hoping that being this close to me is making his body react the way mine is.

“We’re nearly finished.”

I love how rough his voice has gone. He sounds the way he did when we danced together at the club, and the feel of him hard against my leg has been hot-as-hell jerk-off material. But I really need more.

“Fine, then.” I pull away, pretending he’s convinced me, when all I really want is to catch a glimpse of his crotch.

Unfortunately for me, his pants and this angle are doing a good job of hiding anything. Meanwhile, I’m *still* fucking hard. Teasing’s no fun when you only end up teasing yourself.

We spend the rest of the day hanging out at home, cleaning, then cooking dinner, with me stealing touches whenever I’m close enough. It’s almost like a game to see what I can get away with, and I swear I’m not imagining the way Tanner does it right back.

I’m counting down the minutes until Tanner leaves for work at the bar because I need to get off.

The second he’s out the front door, I flop back on the couch, shove down my pants, and jerk myself until I have no energy left for more.

It’s barely a Band-Aid solution to my real problem.

I want him so bad.

I’m desperate to strip him down and trace the lines of every muscle with my tongue.

I want to feel his naked body flush with mine while I hold him close.

And more than anything, I want to drive him wild, and make him feel good, and pleasure him until he can’t remember his own name.

At some point during the night, I drag my ass into bed and fall asleep surrounded by Tanner’s woodsy scent.

I’m too restless to sleep for long, and I’m up and down so much that I hear the moment Tanner gets home from work. It’s already past two, which means he must have stuck around for an hour after he finished.

I sit up as he enters the bedroom, and he jumps a foot in the air.

“Shit, Roo. What’s got you awake at this time?”

I’m so sexually frustrated, I can’t sleep.

“No reason.”

Tanner strips out of his clothes and climbs under the covers in his briefs. I don’t know how the fuck he’s so impervious to the cold, but I’m wearing sleep pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt, and I’m still freezing my balls off.

Until he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me in close.

My eyes shoot wide. “Someone’s feeling cuddly tonight,” I joke.

He hums into my hair. “Work was *long*.”

“Any trouble?”

“Never is. Other than standing outside in the cold so long, I swear I have frostbite.”

“Good thing you don’t feel it anyway.” There’s no way I can concentrate on the conversation with him nearly naked behind me. Whose stupid idea was it to wear all these clothes to bed? Just imagining his impressive chest pressed against my bare back derails my thoughts into territory so filthy, I’m glad Tanner can’t read minds.

Because if he could, there’s no way he’d be running his nose down the column of my neck. I shiver and scramble out of his tight hold. “What are you doing?”

His eyebrows rumple up, and he looks so adorably bemused, I want to crawl back down beside him. Instead, I stay put, and Tanner heaves himself up to sit next to me.

It must be a sign of maturity or some shit when I manage to hold back from licking his chest.

“Roo ...” He sighs, and I catch a whiff of his breath.

“Have you been drinking?”

“I stayed and had a couple while they cleaned up. I needed to clear my head a bit.”

“And what’s got it so full?”

He stares at me, and the conflict on his face settles something inside me. It suddenly all makes sense, because I’ve been there.

“Is it the bi thing?”

His eyes fall closed as his chin drops to his chest. “Yes. That’s ... that’s exactly it.”

“Huh. I thought you’d forgotten all about it.”

“How the hell can I do that when it feels like all I can concentrate on?”

“Is it stressing you?”

“A little.”

I try not to be offended. Or hopeful. “But why? It doesn’t matter who you’re attracted to.”

“No, I know.” He finally meets my stare again. “But I thought I was one thing, and now it’s all so confusing. Am I actually attracted to men, or am I only curious? I dunno, Roo. And it’s sort of scary to go around telling people when maybe it’s my brain being dumb again.” He rubs his eyes. “Things were supposed to be easy and straightforward. I wanna be respected and looked up to, but how can I be any of those things when I don’t even know who I am?”

My heart aches for him because I know exactly what he’s going through. The fear, the not knowing what comes next, the dawning realization that you’re not like everyone else.

“I thought I should give you space to figure this out on your own.”

“No.” His voice pitches high, and this time when he reaches for me, I go easy. The gigantic bastard pulls me right into his lap and wraps his arms around me. “Space is the last thing I want. I’m just ...” His lips ghost over my

cheek, and I breathe in the smell of beer again. “I can’t read about this, so I need you.”

“You’re focusing on all the wrong things.”

“How do you mean?”

“You’re not dumb, and you don’t have to tell anyone. There’s no rush to this, and I’m here to help you as much or as little as you want. For me, it was pretty simple. Women have zero appeal, but I couldn’t ignore my attraction to men.” I cup his face because I can. “You’ve been ignoring this side of yourself for so long, it’s automatic, and I imagine it’d be pretty hard to break away from that. Not to mention, being bi sounds so fucking confusing to me. Some of the bi people I’ve met say their interest is even, some say it leans more one way, or toward a certain type of person. It doesn’t have to be only one way.”

“So how the hell am I supposed to figure out all that?”

“You don’t.” His deepening confusion is so adorable, I lean forward to kiss the lines on his forehead. Would I have done that if Tanner wasn’t tipsy? I have no idea. “You stop worrying about it. You stop trying to label yourself and instead, just take away the inhibitions. Instead of focusing on gender, focus on how people make you feel. Meet people, talk to them, find a connection, and don’t worry about what’s in their pants. Then when you’ve found someone you feel that pull toward, give yourself permission to follow up on it, and to hell with what people think. Your friends, at least, are never going to turn their backs on you.”

“That sounds ... like something I could do.”

“It is.”

He hugs me close again, and I relax against his chest. He asks, “And have you ... found your person?”

Yes.

I found my person when I was eleven, and even if I didn’t know what love meant, I already knew there was

no walking away.

“I’ve ... found a lot of people.”

He nods stiffly, and maybe I shouldn’t have said that, but there’s no way I can tell him now, while he’s already half freaked out, that *he’s* my person and I’m beginning to worry that no one else will ever be enough.

“New scenario. What if I find a guy I’m really keen on, and when he pulls out his dick, I realize I’m actually not into it?”

“Then you say no. But trust me, when you’re turned on, you don’t stop and focus on the fact that you’re touching a dick. You just want more. And if you have real feelings for him, it won’t matter if he has a whole marching band down there.”

“That’d be loud sex.” Tanner snorts. “But what if I do say no and he gets pissed?”

“Then he gets pissed. That’s not on you.”

“Except, I feel like it would be. If I did something with ... this *guy*, the last thing I’d want is to hurt him.”

I shake my head. “Tan, you’re the sweetest guy I know. Anyone who doesn’t believe you have their best intentions at heart doesn’t deserve you.”

Tanner’s big hand cups the back of my head as he presses a kiss to my ear. He lingers there, nose dragging over my skin until he kisses my temple, then my eyelid, then my cheek. I’m a stupid, weak person, because even knowing he’s been drinking, I’m desperate for more. I tilt my face up. His lips slide along my jaw before coming to a rest over the corner of my lips.

This is new.

My heartbeat starts to pound in my ears.

His hand tightens in my hair for a moment, and then

He brushes his lips over mine.

I stop breathing.

I don't move.

I have no clue what the hell is happening here, but I can practically taste the beer on his breath. Tanner has never, ever kissed me like this sober, so as much as I want to sink into the kiss, I don't respond at all.

I can't.

Because my needs come second to Tanner's, and what *he* needs is a supportive friend, not someone prepared to take advantage of him while he's drunk.

The moment he pulls back, I scramble out of his lap. "Right, okay, well, that's enough talking; you need sleep."

I wrap the blankets tight around me and ignore the fact that Tanner still hasn't moved. I refuse to let him know I've gotten hard over him again, and if I so much as look at him, I'll be back in his lap, mouth on his, taking what I've wanted for close to a decade.

"Roo?" he whispers.

"Yeah, what's up?" For fuck's sake, why does my voice sound like that?

"Can I hold you?"

The hurt in his voice has me ready to say yes, but I know I'm not strong enough for that. If I'm touching him, I'll want more. More than he's ready or maybe even wanting to give me. I've only got one shot at telling him how I feel, and it's not going to be by rutting against him while he's half drunk.

I swallow back my immediate response. "Not tonight."

He doesn't answer, and it takes another minute for him to get back under the covers. And it's lucky I have nowhere to be tomorrow, because there's no way I'm sleeping tonight.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
TANNER

Dumb, dumb, dumb, dumb, dumb.

I wish I could blame the alcohol for my idiotic move, but I only had two beers last night. With all his talk of trying things out with someone I trust, I'd tested the waters with him and got my answer loud and clear.

I don't think he's ever scrambled away from me faster. Trying not to dwell on it too much, I go back to scrubbing the shower, taking all my anxiety out on this tiny apartment. It's past lunchtime, and I want so badly to go in there and wake him up, but I'm scared of what he's going to say.

Will it be awkward?

Will he gently remind me that just because he's gay doesn't mean he's into me?

Oh God, will he want to *leave*?

I drop back to sit on the wet tile and lean my head against the wall. I'm a mess. Since when do I have a complete meltdown over someone I'm interested in?

Then again, none of those people were Roo.

I can't lose him.

And if that means keeping things the way they are, I've gotta respect that.

Maybe we need to go back to that bar? I can start off slow by dancing with a guy, maybe making out with one. I don't have to jump in all at once.

Still, Roo's lips under mine was the single greatest feeling I've ever experienced. There's no way some

random hookup can live up to that.

“What are you doing?”

I let out a startled noise as I look up and find Roo leaning against the doorframe. “Finally awake, huh?”

God, he looks adorable. I try to ignore it, but I can't. His hair is a mess, and one freckled cheek is red and covered in lines from his pillow. He stifles a yawn, and by the time his gaze lands on me again, I'm grinning.

“There's no way you're still tired.”

“Someone woke me up late.” He pushes down the toilet lid and sits on it. “Isn't your ass getting wet?”

I cringe. “Yeah, it's not pleasant.”

“In the right circumstances it is.”

I laugh. “Eh, maybe I'll find out someday.”

For some reason that surprises him. “You'd want that? I mean, in my experience most guys jumping into experimenting with men want to top.”

“I haven't given it much thought. Like you said last night, if it's the right person, I don't think it would matter much to me.”

Maybe it's something I need to think about, though. Then again, if it was Roo, the answer would be a solid yes to anything he wants. I'd have some hard limits, but him fucking me wouldn't be one of them.

Oh God. My chest flutters.

“You kissed me last night,” he whispers.

I immediately drop my head. “Ah, yeah, sorry. I didn't think ...”

“You've kissed me hundreds of times before, but never on the lips. Were you drunk?”

“No.” I scowl, then realize he was probably giving me an out. But he'd pick a lie from a mile away. “You were going on about finding someone I trust to test things out, and ...” I force myself to look at him. “I trust you.”

He doesn't know what to say. He opens his mouth, then quickly closes it again. "What ... what does that mean?"

"I dunno."

"Well, you should probably come up with *something*."

And now I'm freaking him out again. Perfect. "Look, it's nothing you need to worry about. Forget I said anything."

He slides off the toilet lid and kneels next to me. "Sorry." He takes my hand. "That came out wrong. I *want* you to tell me whatever you're ready to. That's all. But no matter what, *no matter what*, I'm always here for you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Of course."

I lean closer to him, terrified I'm about to fuck everything up, but I've never not trusted him before. So I'm not about to start now. "I meant that if there was anyone I wanted to try stuff out with, it'd be you."

His eyes have lost all hint of sleepiness, and now he's on full alert. "You want to ..."

"I dunno, maybe?"

"With me?"

"Who else?" I laugh, and it lessens some of the tension in my chest. "Is that really so unbelievable? I trust you more than anyone, and if I say no, you won't take it personally. If things happen, you know where my experience is, and I know you won't think differently of me if I'm shit at giving head."

"You know you, umm, need to be attracted to the person you're *trying* stuff with, right?"

"Have you *seen* you? That won't be a problem."

His eyes widen. "I'm trying to be realistic here. Yeah, we're close, but it's always been platonic. You're going to

see my dick, and not just in a locker-room-type scenario. It'll be hard, and you'll be touching it, and ...”

He trails off as I start to tent my sweatpants, but what does he expect when he's talking like that? The image of holding his hard cock is driving me crazy. I try to laugh off my reaction as I adjust myself, which really doesn't work when you're free-balling. “I guess that's your answer.”

“Okay.” His voice is shaking.

“Okay.” I reach over, planning to pull him closer, but Roo stands.

“Not right now. You've only been thinking about this for a few days. Give yourself some time to get used to it, and then we can ... you know.”

I'll take it. As much as I want to make a move on him now, I also know it's probably smart to think about it while I'm not insanely turned on.

I don't blame him for not taking me at my word, because even with all this male curiosity I have going on, I've always been kinda straight. I mean, well, totally straight as far as I was concerned, but I couldn't fool my body. All those times I caught myself staring and couldn't explain it? Yep, I was checking out dudes' butts.

And now I watch Roo's as he walks out the door.

I scramble to follow him.

The thing is, it's becoming very clear to me why Roo doesn't have an issue picking guys up. He might resemble a vicious little kitten at times, but he's confident, his freckles draw attention, and he has an ass that makes even me sweat.

And it's not like I haven't seen his dick before, but I've never *looked*.

I wanna look. And maybe touch. And I can barely believe I'm having these thoughts about *Roo*, but now they've started, I can't turn them off. I watch as he moves around the kitchen, making coffee, lean body fitting so perfectly into my space that I can't drag my eyes away.

My smile splits my face. “Hey, Roo? What do you say to a slow kangaroo?”

“We’re not doing this.”

“Hop to it.”

His groan is so loud, I hear it over my laugh.

“Where do kangaroos like to eat?”

“I’m not playing this game.”

“Close.” I pinch my forefinger and thumb together. “iHop.”

He yanks out the cutlery drawer, grabs a fork, and points it at me. “One more, I swear to God.”

I mime locking my lips, and just as Roo thinks it’s safe to lower his weapon, I pluck it from his grip, toss it in the sink, and throw him over my shoulder.

“Tanner!”

“What do you get when you cross a kangaroo with a donkey?”

His whole body slumps. “Kick-ass.”

I love it when he plays along. “Who do you call a lazy kangaroo?”

He reaches down and pinches my ass, so I do the same right back. And damn, that ass. I pinch it again, needing an excuse to touch him.

“On a scale of one to one hundred, do you have any idea how much I regret teaching you those jokes?”

I laugh, and his body slides along mine as I set him back on his feet. Even though he’s perfectly capable of standing on his own, I hug him to me anyway. Because I can. Because I’m *still* struggling to believe it.

It’s been a long five years.

“I don’t regret any time we’ve spent together.”

“Oh yeah?” His expression turns challenging. “What about the nights we’d be up, changing your sheets because your best friend was wetting the bed at sixteen?”

Or in sophomore year when those homophobic seniors threw a shake at us as they drove past? What about—”

I slap my hand over his mouth, not needing to hear any more. He licks my palm. I kiss his nose.

Did those moments suck? Yeah. Especially since even back then I wanted to fit in and be looked up to.

Would I change those moments? No fucking way.

Roo would never believe me, so I just smile and let him finish making his coffee, while the real answer circulates in my head.

All those moments and more?

Totally worth it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
ROO

It's one of Tanner's rare days off. He doesn't have to work or help out anyone, but instead of relaxing like most people do, he drags me to the pool again.

"Haven't I been here enough?" I moan playfully.

He smirks as he holds my gaze and slowly peels off his shirt.

No fair.

Tanner has to know what he's doing to me. Since his proposition earlier, he's gone out of his way to be close to me. And he's not even trying to be subtle about it. I've been paying very. Close. Attention.

He makes his way to the side of the pool, and my gaze is stuck on his ass in those tight swimmers. I've always loved the way his swimmers cup his dick and balls, and *oh shit*, I'm getting hard again.

I quickly strip out of my clothes, jump in, and swim over to sit on the step, where I watch Tanner dive in.

God, he's flawless. If he'd ever left Sunbury as a kid, I have no doubts the Olympics would have been an achievable goal. He had coach interest and everything, but ultimately decided that wasn't the life he wanted.

Seeing the power in his arms as he swims freestyle down the pool sends a shiver through me. I really need to give some thought to his question, though. Because letting Tanner experiment with me goes way beyond anything I've ever done before.

Most of the time it's fine—the "curious" guys get what they want, I get off, and then they freak out and

fuck off.

With Tanner, the freak-out and fuck-off part scares me.

Even worse would be if we hooked up, he decided he liked it, and then he went out and found himself a boyfriend.

Urg, the pain.

And maybe I'm being dramatic again, but it actually hurts.

Tanner pops up in front of me and blows a stream of water right into my face.

"You're disgusting."

My insult does nothing to his smile. "Mmhmm." He moves closer and wraps his arms around my waist.

Fuck, it feels good.

"Swim time, Roo."

I pretend to snarl and act like, *Oh no, don't smoosh me against you*, but I cling to his neck like I never want to let go. Because, accurate. We drift along for a while, Tanner moving his arms in lazy strokes while I lie over his torso like it's a life raft. His face is so close, I can make out every little imperfection of his scar.

I'm about to lean forward and kiss it when Tanner says, "Tell me about gay sex."

Huh?

"Hello, random," I say.

"Is it, though? If we're gonna do it, I should probably know what's up."

Do ... it. Faced with the prospect of Tanner's dick, it's like I'm suddenly a blushing virgin. I swallow past the nerves. "What do you want to know?"

"Obviously there's hand jobs and blowjobs and anal. Anything else I don't know about?"

“Tan, there’s a whole queer world out there.” I shake my head as I realize I’m going to play along. “Fine. But so you know, this isn’t all gay-specific either. Loads of people do blowjobs and anal, rimming too.”

“Rimming?”

“Don’t tell me you’re twenty-three and have never heard of rimming?”

“Not like I discuss sex with people a whole lot, and I can’t read, so ...”

“And you can’t learn this from porn?” Please? Because if this conversation keeps up, I don’t know if I’ll be able to stick to my resolve of giving him a couple of days to think about it.

“You’re supposed to be teaching me.” His stare drops to my mouth. “I wanna hear it from you.”

Fine, then. I’m going all in. “Rimming is where you eat out another person’s ass and fuck their hole with your tongue. Frotting is where you rub your cocks together until you come. Docking is where you cover one guy’s dick with your foreskin and jack off.”

Tanner’s eyes have widened, and it makes me smile.

“I ...” He swallows. “Don’t have a foreskin.”

My smile gets wider. “Luckily, I do.”

“And do you like that?” His voice has dipped, got a bit huskier, and I love the sound of it.

Still, this questioning is dangerous territory when the last thing I want to think about is the men I’ve been with who aren’t Tanner. “Think you want to try it?”

“I’d try anything with you.”

Is that so? Time to test him a little bit. “Would you let me fuck you?”

“Yes.”

Where I’d been trying to catch him off guard, apparently it’s me who’s completely surprised. The thing is, experimenting is all about testing the waters, and it

always comes with a heavy dose of uncertainty. There was nothing uncertain about Tanner's answer. My mouth has gone dry, and while I want to tease him and push a little more, I'm not so sure *I* could handle it. My dick is half hard already.

Tanner glances quickly around the empty pool, then leans forward and lightly brushes his lips over mine. "I don't want to wait a few days."

"You can't be sure—" I don't get to finish that sentence, because Tanner shifts me until his *very solid proof* is pressed against my thigh.

"I'm sure."

His unwavering stare turns my gut to jelly. I want nothing more than to reach down and take his cock and make him feel good. But even I have enough self-control not to push my luck in a public place.

"Wanna go home?" he asks.

Hell yes.

I'm not sure what to expect the moment we're through the front door, but Tanner doesn't give me any time to question it. He dumps his bag and backs me into the wall.

"This okay?" he asks.

Look at that, my voice is still gone. I nod so hard, I almost headbutt him.

Lips land on the corner of my ear, my temple, my cheek. The quick, light kisses start to slow, linger, and the subtle change makes my excitement flare.

Tanner pulls back, and his hands move to cup my face. He studies my features, thumb brushing over my cheek as my gut ties itself in knots.

Fuck this.

I grab the collar of his T-shirt and tug. Our lips crash together, and my heart stops at the feel of his mouth against mine. He's completely still for all of a few seconds, and then I run my tongue over his lips.

It opens the floodgates. Tanner pushes closer. His kisses are stronger, more sure, and his mouth coaxes mine open so his tongue can sweep forward and run over my own.

My moan is completely fucking unwelcome until Tanner echoes the sound, all rumbly and deep in his chest. It makes me light-headed.

He tastes like salt, and I want to give in to all these feelings, but that cynical side of my brain kicks in. I slow the kiss down, not wanting to pull back, but breaking away from him enough that I can talk. Except the second my tongue is no longer in his mouth, he ducks his head and starts to drag openmouthed kisses over my neck.

"Tan ..." God, that feels incredible. "*Tanner.*"

He pauses, lingers, then slowly pulls away. His eyes are all unfocused, and his big lips are shiny and swollen. "Is this ... is this still okay?"

"You have no idea."

His beautiful face breaks into a smile that lights up his eyes. "Why are we stopping?"

"I wanted to slow things down a little." I want to know how the hell I'm going to get through this without getting my heart torn out.

"What for?"

"Well, since you're, umm, experimenting, I think it'd be a good idea to work out some ground rules. You know, to make sure we know right from the start what this is."

"Yeah, good idea."

He's staring at my mouth, and it makes my gaze drop to his shiny, pink lips.

We actually kissed.

And he wants to do more.

We need to have this conversation, when all I want is to get on my knees instead. But I need to be careful here.

Because while I sure as hell am going to let him do all the experimenting he needs, I'm also well aware it's going to wreck me.

And I'm jumping right into the deep end anyway.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
TANNER

Thank God he seems to be humoring me. It's a bit of a mind fuck to hook up with your oldest friend. Even I'm a bit on the fence. I mean, yeah, I find him attractive, but that doesn't mean I'm going to be comfortable with touching him naked.

However, if how hard I am right now is any indication, I'd say I'm good to go.

"That kiss was okay, though, right?" I ask. Because I have to. Because for me, that kiss was ... wow.

"Hottest kiss of my life."

Thank God, because if he regretted it for a minute, I would have felt like a piece of shit. "Wanna do it again?" I aim for playful, but my heart is in my damn throat as I wait for him to answer.

Roo grabs my hand and pulls me over to the couch. "We need rules. First, this can't fuck up our friendship."

"If anything, it'd make our friendship better."

"No disagreement here."

We grin at each other.

"So that's a yes?"

"*Second*, once your experiment is done, that's it. And when my bed gets here, I'll be sleeping in my room." He takes a deep breath. "We need to make sure we don't cross any lines."

I'm not entirely sure what he's talking about, but if it means getting my hands on him again, I'm all for it.

"That it?"

“Sure is.”

“Good.” I pat my lap. “Hop on up here.”

“I swear, if you make any kangaroo jokes while we’re fooling around, my dick is going to dry right up.”

“Like the desert?”

“You’re not cute.”

I’m sure I detect the slightest hesitation, but I don’t get a chance to focus on it before Roo straddles my thighs and sits right in my lap. All thoughts of joking disappear. He’s so fucking beautiful. All bright eyes and dark freckles and strong jaw. I lean up and kiss the freckle on his bottom lip. The one he’s forever driving me crazy by biting.

Roo’s fingers run over my hair, and he smiles down at me. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“Neither.” I laugh. “I can honestly say I’ve never thought about this before, but it feels sort of weird that I haven’t.”

“Why?”

Goddamn, I wish I could answer that. I wish I could put words to why this feels so right between us, but words have never been my strong suit. Instead, I kiss him again. Less wild need and more the type of kiss that makes my heart beat faster. My hands fall to his hips, and I give them a solid squeeze, reminding myself he’s here and this is happening.

Roo grabs my shoulders and rocks his hips forward. “Sure you’re okay with this?”

Am I? Still seems like it. I steer his hips until he’s exactly where I want him, and when he lowers his weight onto my hard dick, I have my answer.

“Yes.” I kiss him. “Yes, yes, yes ...” My lips skim over his beard to his neck, and I moan against his skin. I want to fucking *devour* him. I want him under me, squirming and moaning while I drive him crazy with my mouth. “I want to blow you.”

Roo jerks back. “What?”

“Can I?” I’m so worried he’ll say no.

His throat works as he swallows, and then he nods. His eyes are wider than I’ve ever seen them, so I lean up, and they fall closed as I kiss his eyelids.

I plant my feet wide and push up from the couch with Roo still wrapped around me. I never want to let him go, but I table that thought and focus on what’s directly in front of me.

Namely Roo and his dick and the fact that I’m about to give head for the first time in my life.

The fact that I *want* to give him head, and there isn’t a shred of doubt in my mind. My cock is *throbbing* at the thought.

“I can’t wait to taste you,” I whisper in his ear.

Roo’s head drops back. “You’re *killing* me here.”

“Not yet I’m not.”

We get to the bedroom, and I throw him on the bed before crawling up to cover his body with mine. The feel of him underneath me is everything, and I slowly start to peel his shirt off and over his head. Mine follows it. And even though this is far from the first time I’ve seen Roo shirtless, it is the first time I’ve really let myself look, touch, and I’m beginning to get exactly what Roo meant.

It doesn’t matter that he’s a guy. All that matters is he turns me on more than anyone I’ve ever met.

I lean down to flick my tongue over one of his nipples, then follow the line between his pecs down to his stomach. He’s still slim, but has the shadow of abs forming, and I take my time, running my tongue over each of them.

I’m not exactly stalling, but I am giving myself time to work up to this.

“You don’t have to,” he rasps.

What he doesn't realize, though, is yeah, I fucking do. I *need* to see Roo lose control. I *need* to be the one who does it.

My fingers hook under the waist of his shorts, and I start to pull them down. There's zero backing out now. And as Roo's cock flicks up and slaps against his happy trail, I get my first look of him hard and needy. It makes my hands work faster to strip him naked.

I'm shaking, but it's not with nerves.

I quickly push down my pants and kick them to the floor with his. Goose bumps rise on his skin, and I lean down to kiss the ones on his thigh.

"Are you sure?" he asks again.

I snort back a laugh. "Anyone would think *you're* not."

"No, no, definitely am. But most guys who are experimenting tend to want their dicks sucked, not the other way around."

I scowl at the thought of him comparing me to anyone else. "Roo, I know you've been with other people, but none of those guys have room in our bed, got it?"

He blinks at me, clearly stunned. "Got it."

"I don't give a shit what anyone else does. I *want* to do this, because I want to make you feel good. That's literally all I give a shit about right now. And I'm probably not gonna be that great at it ..." I grin up at him, and he looks completely dazed. "But I'm counting on having plenty of time to practice."

"Carry on, then."

When we were younger, I'd discovered Roo was uncut, and we'd had stupid teenage moments comparing how our dicks looked. I never thought for a moment that reaching out and pulling down his foreskin would be the world's biggest turn-on, but revealing the angry-red head of his cock makes my mouth water.

Fuck it.

I lean forward and take it in my mouth.

It takes all of zero-point-three seconds to realize, yep, I *definitely* like this.

His skin tastes a little bit like chlorine, and the precum that leaks out onto my tongue is kinda salty. I hum around the tip before sliding my lips down his shaft.

“Yes ...” he hisses.

It makes me try harder.

I lick and suck and work him over the way I know drives me crazy. There’s zero finesse, but I’m not trying to be precious about it, and even though I know I have no hopes of deep throating him, that doesn’t stop me from trying. I gag myself on his cock over and over until I release it and duck down to suck on his balls. I have spit everywhere, and tears are pricking my eyes, but I’ve never been so turned on.

Every little sound I pull from his body works me up even further. My cock is hard and leaking at the thought of making him feel good.

Who knew giving head could be as hot as receiving?

My hands knead bruises into his thighs as I move back to his dick and suck it down again. I start to bob up and down, dragging my tongue over every bump and ridge as I grind my own cock into the mattress.

It’s sensory overload, and when I glance up at Roo and find him staring down at me, pupils shot to hell, I can’t look away. I up the speed, tighten my lips, and suck so hard my cheeks hollow out.

It tips him over the edge. “Ah, fuck. Coming. I’m *coming.*”

I know he’s giving me warning, but I stay exactly where I am. I want Roo. All of him. And when the first salty spurt of cum hits my tongue, I keep sucking and choking and swallowing it down until his cock stops twitching in my mouth.

I pull off with a *pop*.

“Tanner ...” His voice shakes. “Please kiss me.”

I’ll give him anything. I shoot up the bed and press my body to his, claiming his mouth with mine. My brain is still a complete haze of lust, so when Roo’s hand closes over my cock, smearing precum down the shaft, I start to thrust. His hold feels so good and tight, and it only takes a couple of seconds before I spill over his fist.

When my brain starts to clear from the high, I sink down against him.

We lie there panting and softly kissing, my cum spread between us, for what could be five minutes or an hour. I disregard time as I hug him against me, realizing that was nowhere near enough. I already want more.

“We should probably clean up,” he suggests.

I don’t let him out from under me. Instead, I grab my shirt from the floor and wipe us both clean.

“There we go.”

“Would it have killed you to let me shower?”

“Possibly.” I pull him in tight again.

His little smile slowly melts from his face. “How are you feeling?”

“Incredible.”

“Really?” His tone is heavy with doubt.

“Yup. I feel like I could take on the world right now.” It’s not an exaggeration either. Adrenaline has hijacked my system, and I feel like I could fly. Not only from giving head, though I’m a bit cocky that I did, but from making him feel good, from holding him, from getting to experience this with him.

Every good thing comes back to Roo.

He makes me invincible.

“Do you know you have freckles on your balls?”

He laughs and throws an arm over his face. “You’re not supposed to look that closely.”

“Too bad. I conducted a thorough inspection. They’re on your dick too.”

He groans. “Can we stop pointing out all my flaws now?”

“Flaws?” I kiss the shell of his ear. “I love them. They reminded me exactly who I was with.”

He peeks out warily from under his arm. “And that was a good thing?”

“The best thing. And tomorrow I’m going to inspect you again.”

And again, and again. For as many days as Roo lets me. This isn’t an experiment anymore. My questions are well and truly answered.

Do I like dick?

I fucking love it.

Especially when it’s attached to my overly freckled best friend.

But what does that mean for me now?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
ROO

Tanner wakes me up with soft kisses and warm hands, and it takes me a moment to realize I'm not still dreaming. I've pictured this a hundred times before, so now that it's here and happening, I'm already terrified of when it ends.

"Morning," I croak.

He rolls on top of me, and his smile is as sweet as ever. "Wrong again."

"There's no way I overslept."

"Okay, true. But it's *almost* noon."

That seems like a good sleep to me. I let myself reach up and run my palm over his scruffy cheek. "What are your plans for today?"

"I've gotta go see the parents at some point." He kisses my nose. "You coming? They've been asking to see you."

"Sure."

Tanner's mom and dad might have a traditional view of the world, but they've always been welcoming toward me. There aren't many parents who'd let their kid's best friend sleep over every night. We weren't exactly subtle about me sneaking in.

"But first ..." Tanner wraps his hand around my morning wood, and I can't help thrusting up into his fist. I'm supposed to be setting boundaries, putting safeguards in place to protect myself. I agreed to let my best friend experiment with me. This isn't a relationship.

And if I know anything, it's that curious guys don't stay curious for long.

I arch my neck and catch his lips with mine, catapulting my good intentions out the window. If Tanner wants to wake me up with a hand job, I'm not about to complain. If he wants to experiment and use me, I'm here for it.

Because at the end of the day, I'm a pathetic fucker who's finally getting what he's always dreamed of.

Full steam ahead.

I push Tanner back onto the bed and trail my lips down his body like he did to me last night. He might have liked sucking me off, but I'm about to ruin him for anyone else who's lucky enough to get him in their mouth.

It doesn't take me long to get his eyes rolling, and when his cock breaches my throat, his giant fist pounds into the mattress as he grabs my head with his other hand. His fingers tangle in my hair as he empties down my throat.

My dick is almost painfully hard as I pull off him and kneel between his legs. I watch the rapid rise and fall of his chest as I jerk myself off, and Tanner watching me makes it even hotter. By the time my orgasm builds, I'm hardly in control, and I have just enough awareness to lean forward so my cum lands on his stomach and cock. It's so hot, it takes me a minute to catch my breath.

I collapse on top of him, unable to hold back my laugh. "How are you so okay with this?"

Tanner kisses my head. "It's you."

I guess for him, it's as simple as that. But if he thinks things will go back to normal once all this is over, he's going to be sorely disappointed.

We shower separately and get changed to go over to Tanner's parents' house. It's only five minutes out of town, and the whole way there, Tanner is completely ... well, *Tanner*. He brings up memories and tells stories,

and if I hadn't actually been there for it, I'd never believe we really hooked up last night.

My insides won't hold still.

Joan and Daryl live in a small bungalow on a huge block of land. We have to follow a long dirt driveway to get to the house, and when we pull up, it makes me smile to still see chickens in the front yard. It hasn't changed.

We get out, and Tanner rounds his truck and slings his arm around my shoulders. I automatically stiffen, but Tanner doesn't seem to notice as he steers me toward the front deck.

"Remember when we climbed that tree and I tore my pants climbing down again?"

I laugh. "It wasn't the first time I saw your bare ass."

His hum is deep and rumbly in his chest. "And it won't be the last."

I shove him off me. "Do *not* give me a boner when I'm about to see your parents for the first time in years."

The words are barely out of my mouth when Joan answers the door with a little shriek. "Royce Williams, you sweet thing!" She jogs down the front steps and swamps me in a hug. "We were wondering when you were going to come and visit us."

"Hey, blame this one." I hook my thumb toward Tanner. "He's been busy."

Daryl chuckles, following her out of the house. "Nothing's changed then, I see."

I smile and shake his hand. "Lots has changed."

"I'm talking about you two. Never did have time for anyone else when you were together."

Tanner and I share a smile, the kind that reminds me we were connected way before we shared orgasms, and I hope we'll be connected for long after it.

We follow Joan and Daryl into the house and right through to the back area. A porch spans the whole back

of the house and looks out over the grass all the way to the creek on the other side.

They still have the same printed green curtains, the same wooden bench tops, and when we step outside, it's the same chairs and table Tanner and I have sat at countless times before. It's a warmish day for early February.

I pull up my usual seat, and when I sit down, with Tanner on the other side, things feel ... right.

Like I've never left.

Now that I'm home, it's sort of terrifying how quickly I can forget about all the places I've been and how much I loved them.

Eesh, home.

Sunbury is definitely not *that*.

I give Tanner a relaxed smile as a small *yip* comes from behind me and an excitable ball of fluff darts up the porch stairs and starts to lap the table.

"You guys got a dog?"

Daryl laughs. "We needed someone to keep us company after Tanner moved out." He whistles and pats his lap, and the little furball jumps up to sit with him.

I turn big eyes on Tanner. "See? They get it. I need someone to keep me company while you work all the time."

"I think it's called a job."

"But jobs don't love you back."

Tanner screws up his face. "Pretty sure cats don't either."

I mock gasp. "Do *not* take this moment to tell me you're a dog person. There's no way I'm adding that to the *changed* column."

I swear he's a second away from rolling his eyes. "I'm very much an *animal* person, which is why we won't be getting one."

“That doesn’t make sense, big guy.”

“I’m never home, and who knows what you’re doing, so there’s no way in hell we’re getting a pet I can’t look after.”

Fair point. And while he tries to sound teasing, there’s a note of strain in his voice. I don’t blame him. *I* don’t even know how long I’ll be here, so he’s right. Getting a cat would be a dumb move.

“How’s your mom?” Joan asks as she emerges from the house, carrying a teapot. That, at least, has been upgraded since I last saw them.

“Good. She’s the director for a government agency back in Australia now.”

Joan chuckles. “I’m not surprised. She was always incredibly ambitious.”

It’s true. Dad always jokes that she’s the brains in the relationship, but as an economist, he’s not exactly a slacker.

“How do you feel to be back?” Daryl asks.

“At first it was weird. Sunbury was never my favorite place growing up, but I guess having some time away has given me perspective.” The type of perspective to make me realize that when I finally leave this place again, I need to convince Tanner to come with me.

“Any idea if you’ll stay?”

I shift in my seat. “Ah, no. This is only a visit.”

Joan and Daryl share a look.

“What?” I ask with a laugh as I help myself to one of the cookies on the plate they’ve set out.

“He’s staying for a while,” Tanner cuts in. “Aren’t you?”

All three Everetts are looking at me with identical concerned expressions.

“I ... I really don’t know what my plans are yet. The main thing was to come back so we could catch up. After

that, it's a total mystery."

Not a complete lie.

"Hey." He knocks his knuckles against my arm. "We should buy a place to do up together. It can be a project until you figure something out."

"A place to renovate?"

"Yeah, exactly. We'll move out of that pokey little apartment and buy something bigger. I've been wanting to buy a house for ages but won't be able to afford the down payment by myself for at least another year."

I lick my lips, buying myself time to reply. His offer is so sudden and random, warning bells are going off.

I want to take this offer for what it is. My cynical mind just won't let me.

"Tanner, Royce said he doesn't know what his plans are," Daryl points out.

Tanner turns on him. "Exactly. I'm giving him an option."

"Well, why don't you wait until you know if he's staying."

Even from the side, I can see Tanner's jaw tighten. I'm expecting him to push, but he lets it go. For now. I'm sure it's not the end of the conversation.

"Well," Joan says, "at least you came back in time to help with Sunflora. O'Connell Road will be blocked off, and there'll be a parade. It's gotten much bigger the past few years."

Urg. This sense of *community*. I force a smile. "Clearly, it's the only reason I came back."

Then I fill them in on my surgery and what I've been doing over the past five years. They're beyond happy to hear I got my degree, and Joan wants to know about all the places I saw when I was in Europe. There are definitely a few stories I leave out, though. For her and Tanner's sakes.

The more we talk, the quieter Tanner becomes, and even through lunch he's reserved, until his parents bring up a topic that catches my interest.

"When are they hiring again at the station?" Daryl asks.

Tanner shrugs his big shoulders. "Not sure yet. Maybe in a couple of months."

"And you're going to reapply?"

"Probably."

"Probably?" I repeat. "You've wanted this for years now."

"I have, but there needs to be a point where I come to terms with the fact that it's not gonna happen for me."

"Or that you come to terms with the fact that you need help."

He rolls his eyes. "Okay, Roo."

"You can't even read the assessment, let alone answer the questions. Why are you being so stubborn about it?"

"Because it's nobody's business. If I ask for help, everyone will know I'm the dumbass who can't read."

I shove him. "Call yourself a dumbass again."

He shoves me back, which makes the chair jolt to the side. "You don't understand—"

"I don't? Hello? I'm the kid who used to seize out and piss himself. If anyone knows what it's like to be talked about, it's me. Stop being such a baby."

"Yeah, but you couldn't help that."

"And neither can you. I went through surgery to fix my shit; all you have to do is request someone for assistance."

His parents are watching us, making me feel self-conscious about my sudden outburst.

"Sorry." I lift my hand.

Joan laughs. “Don’t be. Stubbornness isn’t one of Tanner’s better qualities.”

“You’re telling me.” We share a quick laugh, but Tanner pushes up from the table and disappears inside.

His mom and dad share a look, and I sigh.

“I’ll go.”

I find him in his bedroom, lying on his bed. I close the door behind me on the way in.

As I sit on the side of the mattress, I’m flooded with memories of the abandoned air bed on the floor. Of seizing out every other night, and Tanner being there to help me through it. Of sitting up late to watch movies, and eating until we had gut aches.

I miss it.

His deep voice comes from under his arm. “What are you thinking about?”

“Just replaying old memories.”

He holds out the arm not covering his face, and I take the invitation. I curl into his side, and he lets out a long breath.

“Sorry I was a dick out there,” he says.

“I guess I should say that too.”

“Nah.” He peeks out at me with a grin. “Never apologize for calling me out on shit.”

I roll onto my front and prop myself up so I can look at him. “I don’t understand. You want to be a firefighter so bad, and you could actually do it. We both know you’re good enough. So why won’t you ask for help?”

“Because no one else sees me like you do. You don’t look at me and see a big, dumb idiot, and it drives me crazy, because I really am.”

I seal a hand over his mouth. “What have I said about those words?”

He mumbles something against my palm.

“Nope, don’t want to hear it. So you struggle to comprehend some things; that’s literally one tiny part of you. You’re also sweet and kind and the most loyal person I know. Anyone who looks at you and sees an idiot clearly doesn’t know you at all. It kills me to see you worry so much about your reputation.”

His brown eyes turn soft, and he shifts my hand away as he steers my face closer to his. His mouth finds mine, and the kiss is so sweet and sincere, it absolutely kills me.

I jerk away.

“Okay, new rule,” I say as I turn my back on him and swing my legs over the side of the bed. “No kissing unless you’re doing the experimenting thing. We don’t want to confuse this for anything but what it is.”

I hear him sit up behind me. “But I’ve always kissed you.”

“Not on the mouth.”

“Okay.” His arm wraps around my waist from behind, and he presses a kiss to my temple instead. “Anywhere but the mouth.”

My eyes fall closed at how right it feels to have his lips on me. I know he wouldn’t be doing this if I told him the real reason for my hesitation, but I’m a selfish, selfish bastard.

And I’m just waiting until I get my heart broken.



CHAPTER NINETEEN
TANNER

We spend most of the day on my parents' property, and Roo helps me feed the chickens and the goats. Then we head down to the creek for a swim that lasts all of two minutes before we race back to the house to thaw out.

It's exactly like it used to be.

Except for one thing. All the casual touches I've always taken for granted make Roo tense up.

Clearly, something's going on with him. That bullshit rule about kissing, and now not wanting to touch ... I'm starting to worry I've ruined things between us. It's the last thing I'd wanted when I brought up experimenting, but maybe I was right in the first place. Maybe this *is* too weird for him.

It's not his fault it feels so fucking right to me.

Jules is having a few people over for dinner, so when we leave my parents' place, we go home and get changed before heading over.

I love visiting her and Mitch at home. The old cottage is small and warm, and they're slowly turning it into something that suits them both to a tee.

It's what I want to do someday. To have my own little setup and a job that benefits the town. Maybe they're not big goals, not like Roo and seeing the world, but they're mine.

"You both made it!" Jules says as soon as she opens the door.

"Well, you purposely made sure to schedule it on my night off, so I didn't have an excuse."

She flicks a dish towel at me. “Act like you don’t miss me all you want. I know the truth.”

I pull her into a one-armed hug and kiss the side of her head. Then she grabs Roo and hugs him too. Mitch is in the kitchen and offers us both a beer while he checks whatever he’s cooking in the oven.

“Not long now guys,” he assures us. There’s noise in the next room before Leon, Circus, and Dahlia walk in.

I say hi and turn my attention on Jules. “No Rafe and Laura tonight?”

She purses her lips. “Not tonight.”

Code for *they’re fighting*. Again. High-school sweethearts sounds like a great idea in theory, but those two have just as many cold days as warm. To me, that kind of relationship doesn’t seem worth it.

When I settle down, it’ll be with someone I truly like, someone I can have fun with. The love will be the bonus on top of that.

My attention drifts to where Roo’s standing on the other side of the brand-new kitchen island, talking to Circus.

Circus laughs and nudges him, and I’m not a fan of the way the small action makes me frown. They’ve been friends since junior year of high school, when our group really started to form and strengthen, and as far as I know, nothing has ever happened between them.

But, now that I know they both swing that way, and knowing that Roo never knew about me and Piper, it makes me suspicious. Maybe there was something there I was never aware of—they’ve certainly fallen back into a close friendship pretty easily.

Okay, these thoughts aren’t helping anyone. I take another sip of my beer and turn to Leon to talk to him about how his construction business is going. He tells me about helping Mitch put the cabinetry into the kitchen, and how they’re making plans to rip out the wall between the bedroom and the bathroom in the next few weeks.

The conversation keeps my interest, and I focus on how he takes me through the process step by step, drinking in anything I can use in the future. Of course, when I actually get to the point of having a house and doing the work, Leon will jump at the chance to help out, but like Mitch, I want to do as much of it as I can.

My jealousy is long forgotten when Roo joins us and immediately moves close to my side. I bump my head against his shoulder from where I'm sitting on the stool, and catch Circus's eye. He doesn't look pissed off, or jealous like I'd been before, which helps to loosen the knot in my chest.

Circus pumps his eyebrows in my direction, and I shake my head, trying to convey my usual *just friends* message that I swear I'll have to knock into him some day.

But ...

I mean, yeah, that's all we ever were, but we're hooking up now. Or at least, we did last night. And this morning. Does that change things?

Roo said he doesn't want me kissing him whenever, but it's still okay when I'm "experimenting," so that has to mean he's down for more. Right?

Right?

Oh no, I've started thinking, and now I've gone and got myself all confused. Maybe the not-being-able-to-read thing is a small part of me like Roo said, but in moments like this, I swear my dumbass side is trying to take over.

I need to stop getting ahead of myself.

I have Roo back. Shouldn't that be enough?

Dinner helps me relax, which really isn't hard when I'm surrounded by some of my favorite people. Jules and Mitch are the perfect hosts, and Circus and Leon keep us entertained with random stories from the last few weeks.

Then Jules turns to Roo. "Have you started thinking about what you're going to do for work?"

“Ah ...” He shifts in his chair beside me. “Not really.”

“Well, you’ve been here for a few weeks now; you don’t want to leave it too long.”

Circus leans forward. “Have you even decided if you want to *stay* yet?” His gray eyes flick toward me. “No point getting a job if you’re going to move again.”

Jules waves a hand his way. “Stop the teasing. Royce isn’t moving again, are you?”

He doesn’t answer. Not immediately. It sends my gut through the floor. I have no idea how long he plans to stay, but my time to change his mind is getting shorter. I know I *have* to, I just don’t know how.

But worse than the sudden fear that Roo is going to leave me again is his clear discomfort.

“Did I tell you guys about that fire in Coates County?”

That gets their attention. There’s been speculation the fire was deliberately lit, which sounds like horseshit to me, but I’ll let them speculate if it means taking the heat off Roo.

He squeezes my thigh in thanks. Not that he ever needs to thank me for helping him; the need is as ingrained in me as breathing.

The conversation moves on from the fire, to Leon’s company’s work on the new shopping plaza in Port Welling, and then to Dahlia moaning about how her sophomore students are driving her to drink.

Roo’s hand stays on my thigh.

I lean back once I’m finished eating, and sling my arm over the back of his chair. He settles into it, exactly where he’s meant to be.

When we were eighteen and he told me he was leaving, I was shattered, but I sucked it up and wished him luck. It’s what he needed from me. But this time around, I won’t be able to pretend.

After dinner we play board games, and the others drink some more. Roo and I pace ourselves, and I have no idea if he's on the same wavelength as me, but I'm keen to *experiment* again, and I want to have a clear mind for it.

The tiniest bit of guilt hits me that I'm hiding behind a lie in order to keep touching Roo, but I'm not convinced he'd want to keep going with it if I told him I have my answers.

He's being a good friend, helping me out.

I'll just have to keep making sure it's worth his while.

The second I slam the front door behind us, Roo is on me. I'd been planning to get my hands on him, but this is even better. His need comes through loud and clear, and it's a massive turn-on to know I'm the one doing that to him.

Our tongues fight for dominance as I back him toward the couch, unwilling to take the time to head for the bedroom. Tonight has been torture, and I need him now.

Roo's fingers tug at the bottom of my shirt, urging it up, and I break away from him long enough to pull it over my head and yank his off as well.

As soon as his mouth is back on mine, he lets out a groan-slash-growl that shoots to my dick.

"Too many clothes," I mutter against his lips as I pop the button on his pants and shove them down. He's already sliding mine off too, and we kick our way out of them without breaking the kiss.

Roo pushes me, and my bare ass lands on the couch. He immediately straddles my lap and tilts my head back as he starts to work on my neck.

“Fuck.” My hands find his thighs, and I squeeze them, loving the feel of the light hair under my palms, his weight on top of me.

“Time for some more of your gay education,” Roo says, his voice all sexy and rough.

I watch as he spits in his palm, lines up our cocks, and wraps his hand around them both.

A desperate noise leaves me, because what the hell is this? How, *how* does this feel so good? My brain is about to short-circuit.

I look up at Roo, whose mouth has fallen open, and coax him back down to kiss me. Our kisses are disjointed, a mess of tongues and teeth, but I can barely concentrate. And then Roo starts to thrust, and I check out completely.

The glide of his dick against mine has me widening my legs and gripping his ass tighter as I urge him to move faster.

I’m panting and making noises I’ve never made during sex before, and then I look up at Roo, and everything seems to explode inside me. My heart feels too big for my chest, my lungs too small, my brain too fuzzy to do anything other than chant *more, more, more*.

More of everything.

I squeeze my eyes closed and arch my neck into the back of the couch as I focus on his scent, his warmth, his hitched breathing. Everything about Roo surrounds me.

A drip of sweat hits my chest as Roo starts to grunt. “Look at me.”

My eyes snap open, and as soon as our gazes lock, he starts to shake and his thrusting goes off-rhythm.

“Shit,” he groans, and then he’s coming, shooting over my stomach and my chest, and his cum makes my dick glide through his hand. Roo’s grip tightens as I hold him against me and start to fuck his fist. When he loops his free arm around my neck and kisses me, I can’t hold back any longer. My balls draw up tight and tingles race

from my spine to my dick, before my orgasm rips through me.

“*Roo.*” I crush him to me and claim his mouth as I ride out the high.

Wishing this moment would never end.

CHAPTER TWENTY
ROO

I blink awake.

Slowly.

Groggily.

I can smell cake.

A little voice in the back of my head screams, *Not good, not good, not good.*

Tanner's still in bed beside me, but it takes me a moment to recognize he's the lump under the covers.

I stumble out of bed in need of some water, shaking my head to try and clear the cobwebs clogging my thoughts.

It's going to be *a day*.

My throat doesn't work properly as I try to drain the glass. My mouth still feels dry and gross, and all I want is to go back to bed and curl up next to Tanner, but I'm never going to be able to relax enough for that to happen. I'm so tired, but my muscles feel like they're buzzing.

The feeling is all too familiar.

I want the day to be over already.

I'm not sure how long I stand at the kitchen counter, gripping the glass, completely spaced out. The next thing I'm aware of is Tanner's movements in his room down the hall, and I count the seconds until he joins me. I need to see his face.

He's shirtless, and his sweatpants are slung low on his hips, but I can't even appreciate the sight. Instead, as

soon as he's close enough, I step forward and bury my face in his chest.

His chuckle is low, skin warm as he wraps his arms around me and cradles my head.

“Roo, what’s—”

I tilt my head until my ear is sealed over his heartbeat. The moment I hear those steady, familiar thumps, my eyes fall closed and I let out a long breath. Instant comfort.

—” Tanner goes stiff under my face. “Are you feeling like

“Shh ...”

He falls silent, hugs me tighter, and we stand in the kitchen for fuck if I know how long while I listen to his heart. It's the one thing that always used to calm me down. Each steady beat is hypnotizing and helps take me out of my head.

Tanner keeps a tight hold on me as he pivots and leans back against the counter. His fingers twist through my hair, and everything, literally *everything* about him consumes me. I don't know what I'll ever do if I lose him.

“How's your head?” he asks eventually, rough thumb brushing my temple.

“Foggy. But not sore.”

“How about you go and lie down, and I'll make you something to eat?”

“Can't eat.”

“I'll find something small.”

I'm reluctant to let go of him, to move away from the comfort of his heartbeat, but I do. I need to sit down.

Only once I'm on the couch, I need to *lie* down.

And once I'm down, the energy zapping through my muscles makes me want to stand again.

Tanner's talking to someone in the kitchen, and I listen to his soothing voice, not concentrating on any of

the words.

It doesn't take him long to join me, and despite saying I wasn't hungry, the cheesy scrambled eggs he sets in front of me smell good. I lean forward and take a bite, and before I can settle back, Tanner falls into my spot and pulls me against him.

"I feel all buzzy," I moan. I'm well aware I'm acting like a pathetic child, but I hate these days. My muscles feel like they're shivering uncontrollably, but nothing's moving.

"When was your last seizure?"

"A few weeks before I left home."

His hand finds my hair again. "And is this a usual amount of time between them?"

"There is no usual amount since the surgery. A month sounds about right, but it ranges from a couple of days to as far as six months."

"I called in sick for work tonight. I'll be here."

I could sob. "You won't get in trouble?"

"No, but I wouldn't care if I did."

"I ..." I'm not sure how much I can say. "When I have them and you're not there, all I can think about are the times you were. You have no idea how bad I wanted that back."

"Well, you have me now. For as long as you need me."

I want his words to mean what they do when I say forever. I don't doubt that Tanner loves me, but I do doubt he loves me the way I need him to. And right now, that's not a conversation I have energy for. But I do need to have it.

Living in this bubble where I can fool myself into thinking we're boyfriends isn't healthy. It's like my high school unrequited love all over again, except this time, I *don't* enjoy it. This time I know it's only a matter of time before people expect us to grow up and move on with our

lives, to find our other halves, and if Piper is any indication, people want that of Tanner sooner rather than later.

I refuse to give him up without fighting for him first.

He leans forward to grab the bowl, then starts feeding me. I let him. Tanner loves to feel needed, and there's no one who needs him more than I do.

Besides, if he wasn't feeding me right now, I wouldn't be eating. The thought of lifting my arms or holding my own body weight seems like way too much effort.

I'm so thankful my seizures are rare these days because I always feel so drained before *and* after. Whenever people ask me if I regret the surgery because it didn't fix things, I always tell them I'd go through it all again. It was hard, and recovery was a lot, but at least now I have some form of a life back. At least now I can offer Tanner more than complete exhaustion and total responsibility for another person. During senior year, it was almost always like this.

I'm the Roo he first became friends with, before things went downhill so dramatically.

Tanner sets the half-empty bowl back on the table. "You done?"

"Yes." I'm still struggling to get this last bite down.

"Good." Tanner loops an arm under my knees and stands, taking me with him. It catches me by surprise, but I manage to grab hold of his neck before he drops me. "We're gonna get my laptop, and lie in bed, and watch movies all day."

"I don't think we've ever done that before."

"I don't think we have either."

My heart feels full as he tucks me in and grabs a glass of water and his laptop. He sets it on the nightstand, then climbs into bed behind me.

"Try and sleep."

“How the hell am I supposed to do that when your dick is right beside my ass?”

He laughs. “You don’t think about it.”

“Bit hard.”

“It’s not hard at all, actually. And you’re not in any state to be thinking about my dick.”

“I’m *always* thinking about your dick.”

He laughs again. I love that laugh. I wish I could take the time to enjoy it, but my brain is still all fuzzy. So instead of watching the movie, I let my eyes close and concentrate on branding this moment to my memory. I’m convinced there’s nowhere in the world safer than being in Tanner’s arms.

He leans over me at some point to switch movies, but I’m in a weird limbo between awake and asleep and not in any hurry to move past it.

I roll onto my back to look up at him. “Can I ask you something?”

“Always.”

“In high school, did you ever think your life would be easier without me around?”

He hums as he stares across the room, thinking. “Well ... life might have been easier. But easier doesn’t mean better, and I wouldn’t have changed things even if I could.”

“You used to get teased.”

“So did you. And I don’t anymore. The way I see it, those closed-minded assholes were what I had to go through to earn you.”

“*Earn ... me?*” Even without a fluffy brain, I’m sure those words wouldn’t make any more sense.

“A friend like you is a gift. You’re loyal and fearless, and you’d support me with any little thing I wanted to do. Not everyone is lucky enough to find their Roo. So yeah, I had to get through a little teasing, but who the

fuck cares? Because I always knew that as soon as I walked out of that locker room, I'd be heading straight for you and ..." He pauses for a moment. "I dunno. When we're together, I forget about all the stuff I'm supposed to worry about."

I swear I have damn hearts in my eyes. It's these moments, where Tanner doesn't try to hide that he feels this bond between us as intensely as I do, that give me hope. It's not healthy to indulge in it, but I do anyway. I use the excuse of being tired and feeling weird to reach for his face and run my hands over his cheeks. To tilt his mouth closer to mine.

Our lips skim together for a moment before he pulls back and presses his lips to my forehead instead. "You need to sleep."

I pout and grip his arm tight. "Stay."

"Roo, I'm not the one going anywhere."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE
TANNER

I keep my word and stay right by Roo's side. He twitches in his sleep, and every little movement has me on high alert. I've gone through this with him too many times to count, so I'm prepared. I know it will be okay, but even that knowledge doesn't help when he gets like this.

I hate not being able to help him. I hate not being able to take it from him. And I fucking hate that when he leaves again, I won't be there to give him the small amount of comfort I can manage.

Trying to zone out and watch the movie is nearly impossible. I'm not built for lazy days or inactivity or feeling useless. All I can do is remind myself that Roo needs me, and that should be enough.

While he sleeps, I watch his parted pink lips, the flutters of his eyelids, the way his nose wrinkles so sweetly, it makes me want to pepper it with kisses. I smooth back his hair and remember the days at school when he wouldn't feel so good and we'd sit in the nurse's office during lunch, playing cards and distracting each other from the inevitable seizure.

Even when they were coming every other day, he refused to let his parents homeschool him. He refused to let the bullying get him down or the assholes break him. I wouldn't be half the person I am today if I hadn't learned how to be strong from him first.

My ringtone starts blaring in the quiet room, and I hurry to silence my phone before it wakes Roo. His whole face screws up as he rolls away from me, and I

hurry to jump out of bed and leave the room before answering.

“Tanner, you there?”

Piper’s voice comes from the speaker as I make it to the living room. “Hey, what’s up?”

“You okay? You sound quiet.”

“Just trying not to wake Roo. He isn’t feeling well.”

“Oh.” There’s a weird pause. “Poor dear. Do you need anything?”

“Nah, it’s okay. I’ll cook something he can eat later, but right now he needs sleep.” I puff out a breath. “These days aren’t easy on him, so I want to make sure I’m still there with him when he wakes up.”

“Oh ... you’re sitting with him?”

“Of course.”

“In his room?”

“In mine. His bed hasn’t come yet.”

“So where’s he been—wait, you guys have been sharing a bed this whole time?”

I barely hold back from rolling my eyes at her clear shock. Here we go again. How dare two men be close? “Yes, we have. Now I’ve really gotta—”

“Tanner?”

“Yes?”

She laughs. “It’s never going to happen with us, is it?”

I don’t know how to answer. It’s so on the spot, and my head is kinda checked out. How many times do I have to tell her I’m too busy for a relationship right now?

“It’s okay,” she hurries to add. “I mean, it sucks, obviously. But you’re never going to look at anyone the way you look at Royce.”

“What are you—”

“You really love him, don’t you?”

“Yeah, he’s my best friend.”

“No, I mean *in love* with him. You’ve never looked twice at anyone else, even when he was gone, and now he’s back, I haven’t seen you. I don’t know why you’re so determined to ignore it, but Jesus, Tanner, don’t you think it’s time you stopped messing with his head?”

“I don’t know what you think you know, but I’ve never messed with Roo’s head.”

“He’s been in love with you since high school. Everyone knows that. Even you must on some level.” She lets out a long sigh. “Sorry, look, it’s not my place. I ... I’ll bring over some soup for him so you don’t have to worry about cooking.”

I nod even though she can’t see it. “I’d really appreciate that.”

“I know you would.”

“And, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She pauses. “You’ve always been honest with me. Don’t you think it’s time you did the same for yourself?”

We hang up, and I stare at the phone for a long time. I know Piper means well, but she’s yet another name to add to the list of people who think I’m an idiot. If I was in love with Roo, I’d know it.

I don’t understand why people keep pushing just because we’re close.

And, okay, we’ve made each other come the last few days, but no one knows about that.

And they never will when they already lose their minds over us hugging or sharing a bed.

I remind myself that Piper’s opinion doesn’t matter here. Roo and I have always done what we’ve wanted, and we know the truth. We’re friends. *Just* friends.

Shit, I've taken way too long out here. The thought of Roo having a seizure without me there shoots panic to my gut. But when I get back to my room, he's still sleeping peacefully. I climb back into my side and pull him close.

My lips find his scar, and I give him a reassuring kiss, like *he's* the one who's been attacked and questioned and made to feel like an idiot.

The movie doesn't hold my interest, and I start drifting off as well. Just as I've closed my eyes and started to relax, Roo gives a jolt.

I shoot up, on high alert, waiting, watching, sure that was different to all the times before it.

I'm right.

Roo lets out a groan, and then it starts.

His limbs jerk about, and I immediately go into action. I shove the side table away and yank the blankets down before he can get tangled, then grab my phone and set the timer. My heart is thumping in my ears, and no matter how many times I see him like this, it will never be okay. I feel sick, helpless, and irrationally afraid that this time something will go wrong.

His jaw is tense, eyes half opened and rolled back, but I keep my distance. The rhythmic, aggressive movements start to ease. I check the timer.

It's been a minute. It feels so much longer. That's why I never trust myself to estimate.

"Roo?"

Nothing.

His eyes are open but all unfocused as he stares blankly around the room. The disorientation always hits him hard, so I pull him close and hold him tight, trying to give him the comfort he's always needed from me in the past.

I know he's strong, and I know he doesn't *actually* need me, but *I* need this. Because his seizures get me

every time. And I will never admit that to him. The fact that he even lets me see him this way shows how much trust he has in me. And I'll keep doing whatever I need to in order to keep it.

He moans, slurring together words that don't make sense, and I hurry to help him sit up. It takes him a moment, but I see the awareness start to dawn on his face.

“How's your tongue?”

“Fine.” He slumps back against his pillow. “Everything's fine.” His voice is thick and muddled, and every protective instinct in me is getting loud. I give him the time he needs to catch his breath and gather his senses, and I subtly check the bed where he was lying to see if it's wet.

All clear. I guess he wasn't lying about that not being a problem anymore.

Roo holds a weak hand out to me, so I scoot in close and pull him into my arms again. His weight drops against me, and I take a moment to breathe in his peach shampoo and the faint smell of sweat. To feel his warmth and his solid frame in my arms. He shifts until his ear is over my heart, and I wonder if he can hear the way it kicks up every time he does that.

The way warmth rushes to my head, and nerves brush my gut, and I'm itching to kiss, kiss, kiss every part of him I can reach.

I run my thumb over his freckled knuckles.

“I really wish there was something I could do. To protect you.”

“I know you do.” His voice is all scratchy. “But I don't need you to. I just need you here for me when I'm done.”

I press a kiss to the top of his head. “We make each other better.”

“I hope that never changes.”

“It won’t. I’m confident.”

He pulls back, and even though he’s already slept for hours, he looks weary. “Because you love me ... right?”

“Exactly.”

He smiles, but I swear there’s disappointment there. I need to take it away. Leaning forward, I kiss a trail from his temple to his lips, giving him plenty of opportunity to pull away.

A loud knock comes from the front door. Roo stiffens, but I squeeze his hip in reassurance, even as I hold back a groan at the interruption.

“It’s only Piper. I’ll be right back.”

He looks at me in disbelief, and I’ll bet he’s confused that I know that, but he *was* sleeping when she called.

I hurry to the door to let her in, wanting to get right back to Roo and where we left off. I know he’s too drained for any sex stuff tonight, but I wouldn’t mind holding him and kissing him and showing him that I care.

“Hey.” I step aside automatically, and Piper hurries across the living area and into the kitchen to off-load the large pot. “Damn, how much did you make?”

“I didn’t know how long he’d be sick for, and whatever is left over, you can freeze for work.” Her gaze drops to my bare chest, and she hurries to look away. “It’s pumpkin. I would have done chicken noodle, but I didn’t know if solid food was great for people who ... you know.”

“Have seizures? It’s okay to say. And this is great. Thank you. For the record, it’s not so much about him choking—or drowning in this case—but sometimes he gets so exhausted, he doesn’t have the energy to eat, so things like this work better.”

She forces a smile. “Right, well. I’ll pop this in the fridge and get going.”

“I’m really, really grateful.”

“I know, sweetie. Don’t worry about it.”

“And I’m sorry about—”

“No. Let’s not do that again. I’m not so pitiful that I can’t recognize when no means no. It’s fine. I mean, there are *plenty* of other men in this town.” She widens her eyes, and I laugh.

“Who knows? Maybe some hot, wealthy dude will drop by the burger house and sweep you off your feet.”

“I don’t need a man to do the sweeping. I just wish I wasn’t so lonely.” She steps forward and squeezes my forearm. “You’re really lucky, you know. You both are. We’re all out here trying to find our soulmates, and you two found yours while you were teenagers.”

I stiffen and take a step back. “Thank you for the soup.”

“Okay, Tanner.” She looks at me like she thinks I’m an idiot. And yeah, I am, but she could be more subtle about it. “But do one thing. I don’t want an answer, but *you* need to give yourself one. Will you survive him leaving again?”

No. I don’t need time to think it through. Plain and simple, if he leaves, I know he’s never coming back, and never seeing Roo again would kill me.

But I still don’t know what she wants me to do about it.

I can’t *make* Roo stay. I can’t guilt him into moving here permanently just because I need him to.

I have to trust he’ll make the right choice.

I’m so fucking scared he won’t.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO
ROO

I'm not sure what to make of Piper just "stopping by." I listen to them in the kitchen, talking and laughing, too tired to get up and go out there too.

Tanner had been about to kiss me again, and I know he wasn't looking for it to lead to sex since he knows me well enough to know how out of it I am right now. I needed it too. That connection. To feel the love and security I always have when he's around, and the fact that it was interrupted makes me antsy.

The front door closes, and Tanner returns carrying a bowl of soup that smells so good, my stomach clenches painfully.

His full lips curve up. "Hungry?"

"Definitely." My energy has been completely sapped.

"Want me to feed you again?"

"I think I can manage."

He hands me the bowl and a spoon, and *damn*, it tastes as good as it smells. "When did you make this?"

"I didn't."

Oh. I'm tempted to set the food on the nightstand, but I'm so fucking hungry, I can't bring myself to be that childish. "Piper?"

"Yeah, she heard you weren't well and wanted to bring this by so I could stay and look after you."

I give him a dry look. "So kind of her."

"It was nice."

I want to roll my eyes. Is he really missing the fact that this food delivery had nothing to do with me and *everything* to do with him?

“Taste good?”

I shrug. “It’s fine.” And okay, maybe I’m *not* above being childish, because it actually tastes really damn good. Which isn’t fair, because of course she can cook and I can’t.

“So, umm—” Tanner’s ringtone starts vibrating, making us both jump. He hurries to snap it up from the opposite side of the bed and glances at the display. “Shit, I’ve gotta take this.”

I’m not sure who’s on the other end, but Tanner’s warm expression tightens. “Yeah, I’ll be right in.”

Shit. “I thought you were off tonight.”

“At the bar, yes. But there’s a big fire on the edge of town, and they need everyone to help out immediately. I ...” His face drops. “I’m sorry. I really have to go.”

“I know.” I squeeze his hand. “I’ll be fine. I’m starting to feel better already.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Now pretty sure in an emergency you’re supposed to hurry.”

“Fuck. Right. Yes.”

He gets up and quickly changes, while I watch his every move. His pants hit the ground, and I admire the way his bare, muscled ass flexes as he pulls on fresh underwear and his work pants. Tanner turns as he buttons the front and catches me drooling.

“Ah, looks like you’re feeling better.”

I manage a weak smile. “I think I’d admire your body even if I was dead.”

He moves back close to the bed, frown marring his forehead. “I don’t like when you joke about that.”

“It’s called dark humor.”

“And I don’t like it.”

“Aw, would you miss me?”

“We both know the answer to that.” He leans down, and I finally get the kiss I’ve been craving. It’s sure and demanding, and he holds the back of my head steady. Probably a good thing as I’m ready to pass out with how good he makes me feel. His tongue licks into my mouth one more time before he pulls back. “Sorry,” he says as he stands, chest working overtime.

“For?”

“I guess that was against your rules.”

My ... Right. Yes. Those rules that I need to start paying attention to if I’m going to remember what this is. “It’s been a stressful day. I think we both needed that.”

His smile is free and uninhibited. “We did.”

This would be a perfect time to breach that conversation about why, *why* does he need it? You know, if there wasn’t a massive fire he needs to get to.

“Be safe,” I say, playing it off like I’m not concerned. “I also sort of hate the thought of you dying.”

“Twinning.” He laughs as he pulls a shirt on, and I try not to pout at the loss of view. His face turns serious. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, now go.”

He drops another quick kiss on my head and leaves. It’s so normal, so *boyfriendly*.

Nope. Not letting myself go there.

I lie in bed for a while, but feel sick at the thought of Tanner out there. Theoretically, I know this is what he does, what he’s done for years, but try telling my stupid heart that. I’ve finally pushed the boundaries of our friendship like I’ve wanted to for years, so of course I’m convinced it’s all going to be taken away.

Even though I’m still drained, there’s no way I’ll be able to get back to sleep, so I pull out my phone and text

Circus. He messages straight back to say he'll pick me up on his way to Ugly's.

I don't want to go out, but I want to sit here thinking about Tanner even less, so I haul ass out of bed and shower. It helps toward making me feel fractionally more human, but my mood is still in the gutter. Maybe I should have suggested Circus hang out here for a bit, but I need the distraction, and I need Tanner to call before I leave to tell me the fire is out and everything's okay.

Circus shows up as I've finished dressing, and I follow him out to his car. He's always been someone who seems way too big for boring Sunbury, and considering he's one of my oldest friends, I know suspiciously little about him.

He lives out at the start of Crown Trails, but from what I can tell, no one has been to his place.

"Why do you look like shit?" he asks as we climb into his car. His deep voice has a rasp to it from something that happened to him as a kid, but he's never told me about it.

"Seized out today."

"Shit. You wanna stay in?"

"Sort of, but also no. I need to be distracted."

"If you say so." He starts the engine and pulls out of the small parking lot, while I tilt the sunshield down and check my reflection. I spend a minute or two making sure my hair is in place.

"Worried about your scar?"

I sigh. "Not worried. Just don't have the energy to deal with people staring or asking questions tonight."

"Do you ever?" Circus shoots me a perceptive look before turning back to the road.

"I hate that people think they have the right to talk about it, especially *here*, where people judged me for years."

“Wouldn’t that make you more determined to set facts straight?”

“Nope.” I look out the window. “It makes me more determined to ignore them.”

Circus hums as he pulls up in the parking lot down from Ugly’s and switches off the ignition. “Is that why you don’t wear your bracelet anymore?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Not you too.”

“Only saying, it’s all kinds of stupid, man.”

“That’s exactly what I need to hear when I’m already tired and pissed off.”

He drags his fingers back through his longish hair. “If you want to be told what you want to hear, go hang out with Jules.”

“I feel like everyone but you is more Tanner’s friend than mine.”

“That’s because you don’t try with them. You’re still holding off, like you’re going to up and disappear again.”

“I’m not sure I won’t.”

“You do what you have to. But stop changing the subject. Why aren’t you wearing your bracelet?”

“It’s a pain in the ass.”

“Ah, you’ve got that in common, then.” He pauses. “You know people get tattoos these days.”

“Random,” I mutter. “Pretty sure tattoos aren’t a new thing.”

“Not tattoos in general, obviously. People get the same shit from your bracelet tattooed on them. That way it’s always there. You don’t need to worry about forgetting or damaging it.”

I pin him with a look. “That’s the dumbest shit I’ve ever heard. And it’s a giant hell no.”

“Whatever, man. *Your* reasons are pretty much the dumbest shit *I’ve* ever heard. People care about you; that’s the only reason anyone brings it up.”

“It’ll get too much attention.”

Which is literally the opposite of what I’ve ever wanted. All I’ve had in my life is negative attention, and I’d be more than happy to get through the rest of my life as a complete unknown.

“They’re *more* subtle than the bracelets. But fuck this conversation. Let’s go have a drink and see if I can pick someone up.”

I snort. He’s so transparent. He thinks if I’m not given a chance to answer now, the idea will grow on me. Circus must forget exactly how stubborn I am. “What makes you think I don’t want to hook up too?”

He shoots me a cut-the-shit look.

“What ... *Tanner?*”

He smirks. “Actually I was thinking of your seizure. Interesting your thoughts should go there instead.”

I manage not to roll my eyes so hard I see brain because Circus has always been like this. Even when we were all in high school, he refused to listen when we told him we weren’t together. We reach the bar, and I follow him inside. It’s interesting seeing him interact with so many people. He used to hate everyone in high school and still chooses to live on the outskirts of town, yet here he is, saying hello and asking about people’s pet roosters, for fuck’s sake.

“You done working the campaign trail?”

He laughs. “Sorry, I forgot for a minute I’m with Royce Don’t-talk-to-me Williams.”

I flip him the bird, then grab us drinks and join him at a table by the booths along the back.

“You still feeling okay?” he asks.

“I will be if you stop asking me.”

“Fine. Then let’s turn to my favorite subject: what’s new with you and Tanner?”

This time I do roll my eyes. “You ever going to let that drop?”

“Literally never. And when you two are old and married, I’m going to be there saying I told you guys so.”

I try to ignore him, but damn that’s a good image. Me and Tanner. Old and together.

Circus laughs. “You’ve got your dopey, lovesick look on again. Are you ever going to tell him?”

“I ... have to.”

“Agreed.”

I bite my lip, not sure how much I can say. I really need to talk this out with someone, but I’m also concerned that outing Tanner while he’s trying to figure things out is a shitty thing to do. The words are gnawing at me, though.

“Do you ever think experimenting can lead to something more?”

“No. Never.” It surprises me how adamant he sounds. “Experimenting is nothing but straight dudes wanting their dicks sucked, and I’m so done with that bullshit. Queer dudes don’t exist for people to use to work things out. *Don’t* ever suggest it, Royce.”

I screw up my face, and Circus groans.

“You already did, didn’t you?”

“No!”

“Royce! Are you an idiot?”

“Fuck off.”

“Wait ... Does that mean you guys have *really* never done anything before? Ever?”

“I don’t know how many times we need to say the words *just friends* until you listen.”

“Wow.” Circus runs his long fingers back through his shaggy hair as he stares at me. “Suddenly, you suggesting experimenting isn’t the dumbest thing I’ve heard all day.”

“Well, thanks.”

He honest to God growls. “I’m going to say this real clear: You. And Tanner. Are in love. It’s really simple—all you have to do is say it, admit it, and then you can focus on being happy instead of all this insane pining bullshit you’ve apparently been doing for years.”

“You’re going to keep your mouth absolutely sealed about the next thing I say ...” Circus mimes locking his lips. “If Tanner doesn’t feel more than friends after kissing me, there’s not much I can do.”

Circus looks stunned. “All right, I’ll keep *that* to myself.” He shakes his head. “You’re going to flip your shit when I say this, but put your anger on pause and listen.”

I narrow my eyes.

“I love Tanner, but that dude is oblivious as fuck. He doesn’t know what’s going on half the time, even when it comes to his own feelings. He ‘dated’ women while you were gone, but none of them hung around longer than a few dates because all he’d talk about was *you*. It was always, ‘Has anyone heard from Roo?’ or ‘We’re talking again’ or ‘We’re not talking again.’ He’s *obsessed*. You two are all people around this place are talking about. Everyone—and I mean *everyone*—thinks you’re already together. The shit I’ve heard ...” He shakes his head and tries to put on a high-pitched voice, but his rasp keeps breaking it. “*It’s so sad Royce had to leave him for so long. It took five years of getting better, but Royce came straight back to him. It’s so nice to see Tanner smile again.*”

I scrunch up my face. “Please tell me you’re exaggerating.”

“Can you blame people? You two are always together. Even when we were here last time, the first thing Tanner did when he walked in was *claim* you.”

“He didn’t—”

“You didn’t see the look he gave me.” Circus starts to laugh. “I’m sorry to say, but this is all on you. Tanner

won't understand what's happening until you say it."

Circus is right—I *do* hate that he's talking this way about Tanner. That somehow Tanner is too slow to know what's going on in his own head. And yet ... I keep running over the kiss he gave me before he left; the sweet moments we've had together since I got back, that had nothing to do with sex.

I'm an idiot for letting myself think this could be something, but I can't stop.

"Tell me something," Circus says. "When you two were talking about the couch and his bed as the *only* possible options for where you could sleep, did you at any point think of getting an air mattress or something?"

"Yes, actually. I asked in the shop."

"And?"

"They didn't have one."

Circus laughs. "Think of asking around? Because I know for a fact that both Jules and I have one. And I know for a fact that you didn't ask either of us. Plus, I have five bedrooms. You could have either stayed with me for a few weeks, or borrowed a whole bed."

I shift awkwardly. "His bed is just easier."

"And neither of you even considered an alternative, did you?"

I glower at him.

He smiles wider.

"Look, I'm going to tell him, that's the whole reason I came back here. But you don't understand how hard it is."

Understanding dawns on Circus's face. "You're actually worried he's going to reject you."

"I'm in *heaven* whenever he touches me." I pause. "All I want is to be selfish for a while. Those five years apart were painful and if Tanner says he doesn't want anything serious with me, I'm gone."

“You’d be leaving for good.”

“Yeah. Like hell I’d stay in this shithole and watch him move on with someone else.” I rub my short beard. “I’m still working out where I’ll go though.”

“Back home to Australia?”

Australia isn’t home. Tanner is. There’s no way to explain that without sounding disgustingly melodramatic, and I think I’ve covered that enough for one night.

“Haven’t decided yet. But when I have a plan, I’ll tell him. I need to.”

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE
TANNER

Work this week has kicked my ass. It's been busy and the more time I spend at work, the less time I get to spend with Roo.

My one highlight is that he seems better. I know I'll have to face the seizures regularly now he's back, but at least while he's with me, I'll be able to support him.

I wake up early Friday morning, already feeling like crap at the thought of picking up his bed today. He looks so sweet when he's sleeping, and having Roo's face as the first thing I see each day has me spoiled.

I press a kiss to his shoulder. "Rise and shine."

He grumbles and pulls his pillow over his head.

"That's not gonna stop me."

"No, but it will block out your voice."

I chuckle and ease the pillow away. He blinks up at me sleepily, and it steals my breath. "You sure are grumpy in the morning."

"Yes, but you've known that for years."

"I thought you'd be excited about finally getting your bed."

I pinch his bottom lip before he can bite it, and he laughs as he swats my hand away. "You're a pest."

And *he* avoided the question. Should I push it? Would it be weird to suggest he still sleep in here sometimes?

Yes, it would.

Obviously I know that, but it doesn't stop me craving it anyway. We're the ones who make the rules for this friendship, after all. Still, even *I* know grown-ass men don't share a bed just because.

I coax Roo out of bed with freshly brewed coffee, and then we grab the truck and leave. He still looks a bit tired, and I'm hurting basically everywhere, but if we get the bed this morning, we can put it up so it's ready for tonight.

I'll finally have my bed back.

I'll be able to spread out.

It's a good thing.

Yet I feel like shit anyway.

We're at the store for maybe fifteen minutes while he signs that we've taken the bed and I load everything up. I tie it off securely, and then we head down to Harvey's for breakfast. Roo is kinda quiet, but I assume he'll perk up once he's eaten.

"Coffee with loads of cream?" I ask when he slides into the booth we've claimed as our own.

He flips me off. "Black, like—"

"Your soul," I finish. "The usual?"

"French toast today."

"Cool." I almost lean down to kiss him, and catch myself halfway there. His eyes have lit up with repressed laughter. I clear my throat and quickly glance around, but I figure it would be even weirder *not* to follow through now, so I redirect and kiss the top of his head.

Roo snorts. "Hurry back, sweetheart."

I shake my head as I walk away, and immediately catch Piper watching us. She's making an order of coffees as I pull out a stool at the long counter.

"You finally talked to him, then?"

"Nope."

She frowns. "So what was that?"

“Usual coffees, thanks.”

She purses her lips and starts on our order.
“Summer overheard him say he’s leaving.”

Panic seizes me. “What?”

“Yep, when he was out with Circus the other night.”

I shake my head. “Summer must have heard wrong. If he was leaving again, I’d be the first one he told. Not Circus.”

But even as I say that, I think of all the times lately Roo and Circus have hung out, and I’m very, very worried *again* that something is happening there.

And it would absolutely kill me to find out Roo’s humoring this experimenting thing with me, when all he really wants is to be with someone else.

I feel sick.

Somehow I make it back to the table and sit down across from him. I dunno if he notices something off with me during breakfast, but if he does, he doesn’t comment on it.

A few people stop by our table to say hello. Mrs. Grimes asks for help clearing out her shed, and Toby McInnes, the high school sports teacher, stops by to talk to me about the swim team.

“Royce, dear,” Annie Oldeman says as she gets up from her table. “We were all so happy to hear you were back.” I smile at the way people around here tend to talk for each other. “How are you feeling?” She gestures toward her head, and I tense at the same moment Roo does.

“Yeah, better. Thanks.”

“God, brain surgery. That must have been so scary. But it helped, then? So I guess it was a good thing.”

His smile probably looks sincere to anyone but me. “Yes, brain surgery is a real comfort.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

She clearly missed the sarcasm. I kick Roo's foot before he can say anything else, and Annie turns her warm smile on me.

"It's so nice to see you both together again. We were all very worried about you, Tanner."

I don't hide my feelings as well as Roo. "Thank you?"

She leaves with a nod, and I turn wide eyes on Roo. "That was weird."

"Oh, don't you know?" Roo leans back in the booth and crosses his arms. "Yeah, we're apparently dating."

I groan, which only encourages him.

"Word is you've been pining for me for the last five years, and I'm assuming no one has Internet access, because they all seem to think it took me that whole time to recover *just* so I could come running back to you."

"Jesus, people around here are dramatic."

"Very romantic story, though," he deadpans.

I grunt while he tries not to laugh. I understand why he finds it funny—we've been dealing with that crap for years—but if Piper is right and he's planning to leave again, he's not the one who will have to deal with the constant gossip.

If they were talking about me, apparently *worried* when Roo left the first time, what will they say if he up and leaves me a second time?

The *heartbroken guy* definitely isn't how I want people seeing me. And now I have a sudden idea of what Roo's always talking about. Does it matter if their concern is coming from a good place?

Not when it feels invasive and awkward as shit.

The tightening in my gut makes that the least of my worries, though. Because if he leaves me again, I might pull a Circus and move as far from civilization as I can manage.

He needs to stay. I need to convince him to stay.

“You okay?”

“Fine.” It’s a total lie, and I know he doesn’t buy it.

“They’re idiots,” he says, leaning over the table. “Don’t worry about what they’re saying; it’s all small-minded bullshit.”

I look skyward, trying to figure out what’s going on in my mind. “I can handle anything they say.”

“You sure about that? Piper says differently, and you’ve always wanted to impress these people who can never seem to mind their own goddamn business.”

People not minding their business is something I’ve gotten used to since I was a kid. Nearly everyone in Sunbury has been up in my business for as long as I can remember, so their interest in me and Roo seems normal.

The fact that they think we’re dating is pretty standard for them.

And the fact that everyone *assumes* I’m gay or whatever doesn’t seem to bother me either.

No ... What’s bothering me is that they *think* we’re together ...

And we’re not.

They’re all picturing us as a loving couple who go home to each other every day, who look after each other and have each other’s backs, who are planning a future with a white picket fence and pets and maybe a kid or two.

Which is just—

Completely accurate.

I slump back in the booth as my pulse kicks up a notch. We *do* love each other, and we *do* come home to each other every day. We’ve *always* had each other’s backs, and didn’t I ask him last week about buying a house with me? Maybe we’re not talking kids or pets or ... But he *does* want a cat. And now that I’ve remembered

that, I'm tempted to jump from the booth and make it happen *right now*.

I want to give Roo everything.

All of me.

But does he even want that?

I cringe as I think of telling him about this massive brain crash I'm currently having. Roo would never be an asshole about turning me down, but there are way too many people here, and I don't want to put Roo in the position where he thinks he has to be with me.

Because *damn*, that's what I want.

Somehow I manage to keep quiet this explosion of feelings going off inside my chest.

At least for now.

I know I won't be able to keep it to myself for long, though.

Because I'm in love with my best friend.

Fuck.

I'm *in love* with Roo.

All those things I was picturing are suddenly exactly what I want. Roo and a house and a life together.

Now how the hell do I make that happen?

I reach across the table and squeeze his hand. "Love you."

His warm smile melts me. "I love you too, big guy."

I have no idea how I'll get the words out to tell him how I feel.

All I know is I have to.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR
ROO

Tanner is being weird. He seems ... Quieter? Calmer? I don't know, but he's not himself. We put my bed together in way too short a time, and after he helps me make it, I just stand there staring at it like it pissed in my breakfast.

I glare at Tanner when he mentions for the hundredth time how relieved I must be about finally having my own bed.

I'm being a dramatic shithead, and I don't even care. The grumpier I get, the more Tanner seems to smile. I guess *he's* happy he'll finally have his own space back, but he doesn't have to rub it in.

I can't even suggest washing the sheets today, as an excuse to spend one more night with him, because neat freak Tanner already made me do that two days ago.

I hate him and his organization and his enthusiasm.

"All right, Roo Roo, all set."

"Can't wait," I deadpan.

"Let's try it out." Before I can react, Tanner grabs me and tackles me into the mattress. He bounces a couple of times. "Seems sturdy."

Pinned beneath him, something else is getting *sturdy*. But there's no way I can hook up with him, then sleep in separate beds. That will hurt too much.

"Sturdy is my one requirement." I squirm out from under his weight. "What are your plans for the rest of the day? You have a shed to help clear out at some point—did I hear that right?"

“Clearly not, because *we* have a shed to clear out. And not today. I feel like I’ve barely seen you all week.” He stretches out on his side and props his head on his hand.

“I know. I came back to spend time with you, but you’re in hot demand.”

“We can definitely spend tonight together.” He reaches out and runs his thumb over my lip.

I want, more than anything, to spend the night fucking, but then when it ends ...

This is getting hard. Not unlike my dick.

But the longer things go on, the more I feel like I’m tricking him into this. Which means I really need to get my shit together and tell him how I feel.

It’s why I came back. I hadn’t planned to leave it so long, and it feels like the more days that pass—and the more cum we share—the harder it gets.

“I noticed Annie Oldeman prying,” Tanner says.

“Doesn’t everyone in this town?”

He smiles. “She cares. You should know by now that people like to know everything that’s going on.”

“Well, maybe they should have cared when I was lying in hospital. Or recovering. Or, hell, even before I left when I was seizing out every other day. Their compassion would have gone a long way then.”

Tanner gives me a little shove. “Someone’s touchy.”

“I just hate getting into it.”

“So don’t.”

“You really think that’s going to be possible living here?”

“You know I’ve always got your back. That’s why I’m always bugging you.” He runs his finger over my wrist.

“True ...” I bite my lip, thinking of what Circus suggested. I don’t see how a tattoo would solve the constant questions, though. When they come, I’m always

left feeling blindsided and as though I'm nothing more to people than a sideshow attraction.

Except to Tanner. He's never made me feel that way.

Never, in all my episodes at school, or when I woke him in the middle of the night, did he look at me as anything other than me. All he cared about was that I was okay.

I clear my throat. "You know, Circus had an idea."

Tanner tenses beside me. "Oh yeah? What about?"

"Well, I fucking hate my bracelet. Like, more than I ever told anyone. It was a constant reminder that I was separate from everyone else. But ... there might be another way. Apparently people get, umm, tattoos."

A line creases Tanner's forehead as he thinks. "I hate to say it, but he could be onto something there."

"Really?" I lean in, both wanting and not wanting him to confirm it. Because if Tanner thinks it's a good idea, I might actually start to consider it.

Tanner shakes his head. "Are you keen?"

"No."

"Are you going to think about it anyway?"

I roll my eyes. "Of course I will."

"Good. You know ... tattoos are kinda hot." He winks, and I snort back a laugh.

His ability to spin a heavy conversation light again is one of the many reasons I fell in love with him.

"It seems like one more thing to mark me as different. I hate my freckles, and my scar is faded, but it's all I fucking think about. It's nasty."

"Roo, there is nothing about you that's nasty. I ... I wanna see it."

"It's bad enough that you touch it." I shudder, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. It's one of those things that makes me vulnerable. My motto is usually *fuck it* when it

comes to just about anything, but for some reason, that stupid scar has always had the ability to get me down.

“It’s part of you. If it wasn’t for that scar, you literally wouldn’t be who you are right now. It gave you your life back. So where you see something twisted and ugly, all I see is hope.”

I shove his chest as that same hope tickles my gut. “You’re a real sweet talker.”

His adorable confusion is back. “I’m serious.” Tanner wraps an arm around my waist and drags me closer so he can press kisses to my hair, right over the scar.

“Okay, okay.” I shuffle back again as quickly as I can.

Tanner’s expression hardens, and he sits up. “I thought maybe I was being dumb and imagining things, but I’m not, am I?”

“Huh?”

“Since we started hooking up, something’s changed.” When he turns back to me, the hurt in his expression stabs me right in the heart. “Do I make you uncomfortable? Am I forcing things too much?”

“Are you kidding?” I almost laugh. “Why the hell do you think that?”

“Every time I touch you, just normal stuff like I always have, you get all weird and try to get away from me.”

“Tanner, that’s—”

“Is there someone else?”

My eyes shoot wide, and holy hell, are we really having this conversation? “What are you talking about?”

“If I’m holding you back from hooking up with other people or dating ... someone. I don’t know, Roo, but if you need this to end, you’ve gotta tell me.”

I can’t help it, the laugh finally breaks free. I flop onto my back as I take in the complete role reversal

that's apparently happening. Never, *ever* would I have guessed that Tanner would be asking *me* if I want to end things.

“Roo?”

And suddenly, the hurt in his voice sends a bolt of anger through me. One week. It's been *one* week since he worked out that maybe he's not straight, that maybe he likes hooking up with me. Is he really going to sit there and act hurt over losing something he's wanted for *a week*, when I've been in love with him for *a decade*?

I sit up sharply, and he jerks back a little.

“Are you *fucking kidding me*?”

His mouth gapes. “What?”

“If *I* want to end things? If *I* want to date people? News flash, Tanner, I've wanted to date people for *years*, and you've been in my way the whole time. This isn't a new thing.”

“What are you talking about?” He turns up cautiously so he's facing me, and like that, I know I'm going to do it.

Because no matter what I told Circus, I can't hold it in anymore. The pain and worry in his expression are a physical weight on my chest, and it occurs to me this could be the last moment we're together. I doubt Tanner would ever walk away from me ...

But I would.

Because seeing him move on and find someone else would kill me.

Before my dumb eyes can start leaking, I look down at my hands. They're shaking in my lap.

“Tan ...” I swallow. “After my operation, I decided I needed to stay gone for a while. All I wanted was to come back here the minute I was better, but after talking to my parents, I agreed to give a year of uni a try first. Then two. Then I got my degree, then I went traveling ...” I

take a breath. “Each time I told myself that one more year would do it.”

“Do what?”

I finally look up, and find him blinking back tears. Because of course he is. If I’m hurting, he hurts, and vice versa. It’s always been like that with us.

“I thought I’d find someone ... who could make me forget you.”

“Forget me?” His whole face scrunches up. “Why the hell did you want to do that? I’ve spent five years waiting desperately for you to come back, and you were trying to *forget* me?”

“Of course I was! Do you have any idea how painful high school was for me? Or the five years I was gone? For *fuck’s sake*, Tanner. You think you’re hurting *now*? You’re worried about me *now*?”

“Roo ...”

He reaches for me, but I slap his hand away. “You asked if I’m uncomfortable hooking up with you, and the answer is yes. I feel like shit. Because no matter how much I tell myself it’s only you experimenting and I need to keep my distance, I keep forgetting.”

“But that’s—”

“I keep *wanting* to forget. Because I love you. I’m *in* love with you. And I have been since we first met.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE
TANNER

I'm numb. My mouth is hanging open, my fingers are tingling, and I'm just staring, staring, staring.

Since we met?

Roo's eyes have gone all big and scared, and his bottom lip is trembling. All I know is I have to put a stop to it. End whatever thought is making him look that way.

His words slowly start to seep into my sluggish brain, and two words—*in love*—keep echoing in my ears.

Roo loves me.

He scrambles off the other side of the bed. "I'm going to head out for a bit."

I jump from the bed before he can make it to the doorway. I'm not totally conscious of what I'm doing; all I know is I need to stop him from leaving. I block his path, and when he tries to bat me away, I pull him closer.

"Tanner ..."

"Look at me."

When he finally does, his eyes look dull, and his lips are turned down the way they go right before he starts to cry. I kiss the little dip.

He pulls back. "Please don't."

"Why?"

"Because I can't keep doing this. I can't keep hoping that this is more than it is."

I wrap my arms around him and pull him in tight. Then my lips brush his ear. "What if this is exactly what

you're hoping for?"

"I'd think I'd gone crazy."

I kiss the soft skin under his ear. "Then maybe we both are." His peach shampoo is strong, and I hold him and breathe it in, letting myself get lost in his familiarity. "Because I love you too."

The tension in his back finally eases a little under my hands. "You've always loved me. That's not what I'm talking about." His tone is probing, and I know, because I know him so well, that he's trying not to get his hopes up.

Because I'm terrible with words, I pull back and kiss him, wanting to go desperate with need, but slowing it down instead. I stay in control, slowly sliding my tongue along his, and finally, he starts to respond.

Roo reaches up to run his fingers over my short hair as he pulls my head closer. His body presses in tighter, lean muscles against mine, completely swamped by my arms.

I love it.

I moan and press my lips hard against his. "I love you. In all the same ways you love me."

"I—" He shakes his head like he's trying to work out what to say. "When did you ..."

"Sort of this morning at the diner, I guess, but I think it's been coming on for a while. It was every little thing, one after another. And then ... I realized I can't live without you again. I realized I want everything we've ever had, and everything we currently have, and everything we *could* have ... I don't actually give a shit." I laugh as I take a breath. "I just want you to be mine."

Roo's smile is small and uncertain, but I promise myself to make it bigger and more sure with every chance I get. "I always have been."

Good enough for me. I lift him clean off his feet and carry him to what I'm coming to think of as our room. I throw him onto the mattress. He looks so right in my

bed. Then I cover his body with mine, and yep, he looks so right there too.

I'm done being sweet. I attack his mouth and let the need I feel for him flow through me. My heart feels full, my dick is hard, and I can't stop my hands from creeping under his shirt and finding his smooth, warm skin.

Roo spreads his thighs, pulling me down on top of him, and when our hard cocks make contact, a low groan rumbles in my chest.

He cups my jaw and eases me back a little, his heavy panting hitting my chin. "I want you to fuck me."

"What?"

Roo nods, eyes dark with lust. "Please. All I've ever wanted was to feel you inside me."

Then that's exactly what I'll give him. "Tell me what to do."

We lose our clothes fast, and Roo directs me to grab the lube and condoms.

"Damn," I moan, hanging my head back. "I don't wanna use a condom."

His lust seems to burn deeper. "We'll get tested. Tomorrow. Make appointments. I don't want to use them either."

"But we've gotta tonight?"

"Probably smart."

I'm *not* smart, and I don't wanna be smart, but I know he's right. I flick open the lube and pour a generous amount into my hand. "I've gotta stretch you first, right?"

"Hell yeah."

I'm kinda lost on exactly what to do, but I assume it can't be too hard to figure out. I go back to kissing him because I can't get enough, and it distracts me from overthinking.

Right. Fingers. Hole. I can do this.

My hand creeps between his legs, and I run one finger down the crease of his ass. Roo squirms against me, and the small movement makes me smile. My confidence increases a little, and when my finger brushes his hole, Roo moans.

Hearing that sound from him is addictive.

It spurs me on.

I increase the pressure, slowly working my finger in until I breach the tight ring of muscle and his body practically sucks me in.

“Fuck,” I mutter against his lips. “You’re so tight. I can’t wait to be inside you.”

The thought of how this pressure is going to feel around my dick has me light-headed. I kiss him harder, rutting my cock against his thigh as I work my finger in and out of his body.

“More,” he begs, and I quickly give him what he needs.

Two fingers, then three. Roo is working his hips back onto my fingers, like he can’t get enough.

“Okay, I’m so ready.”

I hurry to grab the condom and rip it open, but I’m struggling to focus on much more than the way my dick is aching. When I’m finally sheathed, I squeeze my erection for a moment and try to get myself to calm down.

That works for approximately two point five seconds, though, because as soon as I open my eyes and see Roo watching me, pure bliss overrides my system.

I lean down and steal a sweet kiss as I position myself. Roo draws his legs back farther, I line up with his hole, and then I push forward.

I swear my eyes roll back in my skull.

Needing to see this, I lean back, and with each inch I sink into his body, it feels so good, so right. It kills me to think it’s my fault we’ve never done this before.

“God, you’re sexy,” Roo breathes. He reaches for my shoulders and pulls me back down on top of him. “I love you so much.”

My heart goes warm. I wrap my arms under his shoulders so I can cradle his head, and look down at him as my hips press against his ass. It takes everything in me to hold back from coming already. “Love you too.”

“Good.” Roo slaps my ass. “Now fuck me.”

“Someone’s bossy.”

“Not new information.”

I roll my hips, and pleasure shoots along my spine. “Oh shit.” I duck down and claim his mouth as I pull out and slam back in.

I’ve had sex with a few other people before, but I don’t remember anything ever feeling like this. My thrusts are more instinctual than thought out, all driven by my cock, chasing the high of my orgasm.

Roo’s body works under mine. His ass is tight around me, and when I pull back a little and grip his thighs, tilting his hips farther forward, Roo lets out a loud cry.

“Yes. That. Do that.”

I repeat my movement, and seeing him lose his damn mind under me makes me speed up. I start to thrust harder, making him fist the bedsheets, and each time I pound his prostate, Roo moans.

I can’t drag my eyes from him. His flat stomach, his smooth chest, and all that skin dotted with freckles—all mine. *Mine, mine, mine.*

It’s driving me crazy.

Drops of sweat slither down my spine, and my breathing is coming faster. I doubt I’m going to be able to hold out for too much longer, but damn it, I never want this to end.

Roo’s leaking cock and blissed-out face tell me he’s not far from the edge either. I let go of one of his legs,

then reach down and start to jerk him.

“Tanner, fuck, *Tanner*.” His eyes shoot open and lock on mine as his whole body starts to twitch with his orgasm. Cum coats his stomach, and his ass tightens around my cock.

I let go of him to lean forward, bracketing his head with my forearms. My forehead presses against his, and I can't drag my eyes away as I lose rhythm and my hips take on a mind of their own.

I'm so close, so close, and the second my orgasm crashes into me, groans and curses fall from my lips as my brain completely checks out.

I collapse on top of him, and even though I need to catch my breath, I seal his lips with mine. We're both breathing heavily through our noses, barely even kissing, but I crave the connection, and I can sense he does too.

That was ... exactly right. Maybe I should be worried about what it means for our friendship, or whether this means Roo's staying, or the fact that I'm wholeheartedly ready to be in an actual relationship with a man, but those things seem like annoying thoughts rather than anything I need to spend time thinking about.

It doesn't matter to me that Roo's a guy, only that he's *him*. And I think I've been in love since we first met, too.

Acknowledging I'm in love with Roo breaks open a whole side of my brain I've been ignoring. Waking up beside him is bliss, feeling his warm skin against mine makes me dizzy, and being able to touch him, whenever I want, is literally the highlight of my day. I can't believe that twelve years after meeting him, I can still be as addicted to him as I was when we were prepubescent eleven-year-olds.

The first time I saw him was when I was called to the office in middle school and asked to help show him around. Roo had been wearing a scowl and a chip on his shoulder, and the second we left the office, he opened his mouth and a thick Australian accent fell out.

“I don’t need a bloody babysitter. Mate.”

And even as dumb as I was back then, I could hear how much irony he packed into that one word.

I don’t know what it was about him trying to shake me all day, but I followed him everywhere.

And when I asked him to come over after school, and he said yes, I felt like the coolest sixth grader alive.

It became real damn clear, real damn fast, that everything was better with Roo there.

Apparently that now includes sex too.

Because fuck me, that was the hottest sex of my life.

I glance up in time to see Circus walk into Peg’s café, and I wave him over. The café was an easy choice because it’s off O’Connell Road and nowhere near as busy as Harvey’s. Which means less chances to be overheard.

Circus places his order before he joins me.

“Morning,” he grunts as he takes a seat. “Now what’s so urgent you had to haul my ass up this early?”

“I want your help with something.” Needing something to do with my hands, I pluck one of the sugar packets out of the jar and start to tap it on the table.

“And it couldn’t wait until later?”

“I work later. And I wanted to chat with you before Roo wakes up.”

“It’s about him?”

It’s so fucking hard not to laugh. “Isn’t everything?”

“Only when it comes to you, man.”

Circus’s coffee is called, and I wait for him to get up and collect it as I work through what I want to say.

“So what’s up?”

“I have to convince Roo to stay.”

Circus’s expression grows wary. “I dunno, Tanner. He made it pretty clear he’s not here long-term.”

“I know he did. But he has to be.” I drop back in my seat. “I don’t know what I’ll do if he leaves again.”

“Survive, move on, go back to dating.”

I cringe. “None of that sounds like any fun.”

“Oh *really?*” Circus leans farther across the table. “Aren’t your balls getting sore from months of no action?”

I shift uncomfortably. “Back to Roo.”

“I thought that’s who we were talking about.”

“Can you help me? You know, figure out how to convince him to stay here?”

Circus takes a long breath. “I don’t think I should get involved. I mean, if *you’re* not incentive enough, I don’t think anything will be.”

“There *has* to be a way.” There really, really has to be because I’m desperate here. “He hates Sunbury so much.”

“Can you blame him, with all the shitty memories he must have of this place?”

“Yeah, but there’s good ones too. Way more good ones than bad.”

“Maybe he needs a reminder.”

A reminder. Of all the good times we had together? That’s ... something I can manage. “Do you think that will help?” I have to keep a hold on the excitement trying to take over.

“Maybe.” Circus shrugs. “But maybe you’re asking yourself the wrong question.”

“What do you mean?”

“You keep wondering what you need to do to get Roo to stay. Maybe you can’t. Maybe the question you need to be asking is, when he leaves, would you go with him?”

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX
ROO

There's only one thing I like more than sleep, and that's Tanner waking me up with sex.

Pity for me, I didn't get either of those things this morning.

I'm already in a filthy mood when Tanner pulls up in the parking lot of Sunbury High.

"If this morning involves any form of manual labor, I'm warning you right now, I'm out."

Tanner laughs and leans over the console to press a hard kiss to my lips. "You're adorable when you're all pissy. Now get out of the truck."

Adorable was definitely not the mood I was going for. "If I'm so adorable, you'd give me anything I wanted."

He climbs out and slams the door behind himself before rounding the front of the truck to open my door. There's an extra spring in his step that should be illegal at this time of morning.

"Roo ... you know I won't say no to you, so I'd really love if you didn't fight me on this. I wanna show you something."

I grumble for extra effect as I climb down, but Tanner's got me curious. What the hell could he possibly want to show me at the goddamn *high school*?

His fingers weave through mine as he tugs me to follow him. "I know Sunbury was never the best place for you growing up. It was hard. I saw that, but I also think you're writing it off without fully giving it a chance."

“I was here for seven years. I know what this place is like.”

Tanner throws me a quick smile over his shoulder. “What I mean is, you were dealt a really shitty hand. Things were hard, but they would have been hard no matter where you were.”

“I know *something* that’s hard.”

He pins me with a look. “I’m trying to have a serious conversation.”

“Might have picked the wrong person to bring, then.”

“*Roo.*” Tanner laughs, and the sound is so warm and familiar, I feel myself give in. “Can you play along?”

“Fine. You were talking about *things* and *hard* and *shitty hands*. *Ooh*, that’s probably not the best combination for one sentence.”

“You done?”

“For now.”

“As I was saying, yes, high school and what you went through was rough, but that would have been crap to deal with no matter where you were.”

I really want to disagree, because ... well, because it’s *me*. But I don’t have anything to back up my disagreement other than the bone-deep dislike of this town. “Your point?”

“I want to remind you that it wasn’t all bad. That you focus on the negative, where I see a million positives. So that’s why we’re here.”

I screw up my mouth, really not wanting to be interested, but the idea of a trip down memory lane isn’t totally horrible. “Fine. Convince me.”

The smile he sends my way is far too confident.

We walk through the school, and it’s bizarre how it can look so different when nothing’s changed. It’s like the years have warped my memory of the place, and I’d

forgotten the smaller details I'd never given a single thought before now. The scuff marks on the floors, the high patterned windows, and the smell of cleaning solution that barely covers the stench of *teenager*.

We reach my old locker.

“What do you remember here?” Tanner asks.

I frown at the greenish metal. “Textbooks. And how on my bad days, the sound of people slamming these assholes used to mess with my headaches.”

“What about the photo of our group that Jules made you put up in there?”

I snort.

“Are you *still* gonna pretend you hated it?” he asks. “I caught you looking at that thing a million times.”

“Because it was right in front of my face.” Which is a total fucking lie, of course, because I *did* look at it. Jules in her cheer uniform, Tanner in his letter jacket. I was wearing all black because it was easier to hide, well, everything. Leon had Circus thrown over his shoulder, and Rafe's arms were around Dahlia on one side and Laura on the other. I remember every detail from that photo. Because I still have the stupid thing.

Tanner steers me toward a window that overlooks the quad. “What about that tree over there?”

“Where we used to eat lunch?”

“Yep.”

“I remember Byers throwing a baseball at your head.”

“And?”

I glare at him out of the corner of my eye. “Lunch. Goofing off. What is this supposed to achieve?”

His arms wrap around me from behind, and he presses a kiss to my temple. “Wanna know what I see?”

“I'm sure you're going to tell me.” And yeah, I'm getting snarky. But the more he tries to make me feel, the

more I'm going to fight against it.

“My first A. In my whole life. I was waiting for you there, so goddamn excited to show you, and I think I was even more excited about your reaction than the grade itself. Remember what you did?”

I puff out a breath. “I tackled you to the ground and hugged you for like, the whole break.”

“Mmhmm. I can't for the life of me imagine why people thought we were together.”

That gets a smile. “Total mystery.” I catch my bottom lip with my teeth, wondering whether to play into his game. Fuck it. “Do you also remember I didn't stay at your place that night?”

“You didn't?”

“Nope. Want to know how I remember *that*?”

“Definitely.”

“After half an hour with your big swimmer's thigh pressed between my legs, I had to spend the entire fucking night jerking myself off.”

Tanner cracks up laughing. “You're all class.”

“Didn't get you out of my system, though. And I *tried*.”

“Well, I'm glad you gave me a chance to catch up. Come on, there's more.”

Tanner continues to lead me through the school, pointing out memories of all the shit we used to get up to. Our semi-permanent senior-year lunches in the nurse's office. The way we'd try to eavesdrop on the principal and the kids who had to go and see him. When that didn't work, we'd make up the most messed-up scenarios we could think of.

He takes me past the football field, where we'd come for pep rallies and always end up under the bleachers, setting firecrackers off under people's feet.

Past the field where we had our graduation ceremony only a few days before I left.

I breathe in shakily, remembering laughter, and feeling safe, and the knowledge that no matter where I was in this school, Tanner was always close by.

Goddammit, he's right. I'd blocked out all the good stuff but it's so much easier to focus on the bad. To hold it against the town. To use it as an excuse to stay away.

We loop back around to the parking lot, where Tanner pulls me in closer and lowers his lips to my ear. "Remember what happened right here?"

I look around. "Ah ..."

"This is where you told me you were leaving. I'd driven you to school, and when we pulled up, you wouldn't get out of the car."

"Remind me how that's a *good* memory."

He pulls back and smiles softly, running a thumb over my cheek. "I think that's the first moment I really got it."

"Got what?"

"What you mean to me. You have *no idea* the panic I felt."

"But ..." I frown, looking up at his soft brown eyes. "I mean, you seemed sad, but you told me it was the best choice."

"Because I had to. You needed the surgery so bad, and I didn't wanna make leaving hard for you. I felt fucking sick. As soon as I dropped you off to class, I went straight to the bathroom and threw up."

"*What?*"

He swallows and drops my gaze. "As scared as your seizures sometimes made me, I'd never even considered the possibility that you wouldn't be there one day. Then suddenly it was all happening, and I only had two weeks to wrap my head around it."

“Tanner, I—”

“It’s fine. It was important, and I got over myself enough to remember that. But it *hurt*, Roo. I was so lost when you left, and thinking back on it, I think I was heartbroken.”

“I was too.”

He smiles, but his eyes are red.

“But again, how is this a *good* memory?” I ask.

“This one wasn’t for you.”

My eyebrows lift.

“I know you hate Sunbury, but I want you to try and remember the good here too. We had each other, and I guess I’m asking you to think about staying.”

“Tan—”

“Let me finish.” He rests one large thumb over my lips. “I know it’s a long shot, and all I’m asking is that you think about it. Because if you don’t stay, then ...” He meets my eyes again, and I know what he’s about to say a second before he says it. “I’ll have to come with you. Because there’s no way I can survive being away from you again.”

Fuck.

I launch myself at him. My lips find his, and I press into the kiss, trying to pour every last bit of emotion I have into it. I kiss him with everything I have, and then I kiss him some more, trying and completely fucking failing to show him what that offer means to me.

I know how much Tanner loves Sunbury.

I know how attached he is to being here for the rest of his life.

But he’s choosing me anyway.

And suddenly, I don’t need time to think. Because with one offer, Tanner’s given me everything I ever wanted.

So I’m going to do the same for him right back.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN
TANNER

I have no idea what Roo is gonna choose. Putting my entire future in his hands is a massive gamble, and I'm still unsure if it was the right choice.

I love Sunbury. I've literally never imagined a future where I wouldn't live here, where I wouldn't raise possible kids here, and it kinda freaks me out to think that's actually a very likely outcome.

Even with all my nervousness and uncertainty, I *am* sure about Roo.

We've been tested. We're promising ourselves to each other.

I really want him to stay. But if he needs to leave, I'll follow him anywhere.

The thing is, it'd be smart to gain an official firefighter position here first. I look around the firehouse at the other guys goofing off during some downtime, and try to picture telling them all I'm a dumbass.

All I can think about is high school and how the swim team treated me after they found out I needed learning assistance. Those guys were supposed to have my back, but apparently that shit ended once we were out of the pool.

The teasing about Roo I could mostly deal with.

The teasing about my stupidity I couldn't.

And I'm not convinced Pauly or Jones will be any different.

Even though we went to high school together, Jones was the year above me, and I didn't have a whole lot to do with him at the time. He only knew about me because I was Roo's best friend, and *everyone* knew Roo.

Even if he didn't want them to.

"Yo, Tanner," Jones says as he grabs a bottle of water from the fridge and tosses it my way. "Some of us are heading to a strip club for Pauly's birthday next week. You're coming, right?"

"Ah ..."

Somehow I stop myself from cringing.

Jones laughs. "Come on, man. You haven't done much with us since Royce showed up. Every time I talk to you, you're attached to him. You need to come out and get laid. I'll even buy you a lap dance."

Before Roo and I got together, I probably would have gone, just because that's what people do. I'm sure it would have been hot on some level, and no one can ever be mad about a lap dance, right? But I'm also not into it the way these other guys are. It's always felt a bit awkward, and one-night stands are a whole lot of issues. I wanna fuck and come and move on, but people always stick around for that bit longer than I'm comfortable with.

"Yeah, I—"

"If you say you need to check with Royce, I'm going to have to knock some sense into you. I swear, some days you act like an old married couple."

That makes me smile. While this side of our relationship might be new, I can only hope we make it that far. "Look, I'm sorry you don't have close friends, really. But you might have more if you weren't such an asshole."

"Screw you," he says, smiling. "Just know, I'm not accepting anything but a 'yes.' I'll drag you there if I have to. We all deserve a night off so we can get off, then get fucked up."

"And if there's an emergency?"

Jones cringes. “There won’t be. But I’ve already told the chief we won’t be available.”

And again, having a permanent job means they have that luxury.

But while he’s right about needing a night off to get off, I also don’t need to go anywhere for that.

I’m a lucky bastard.

I watch as Jones enters the living area and passes a water bottle to Pauly. They’re talking smack about next week, and it hits me how easy it would be to tell them the reason I’m not going to go. Even if they try to force me. Because while I don’t want them to find out I’m a giant dumbass, telling them I’m in a relationship with another dude really doesn’t seem like a big thing.

Will they be dickheads? Jones almost certainly will be. Still, when it comes to Roo, no one else’s opinions matter.

That said, these two are the town’s biggest fucking gossips, and if I tell them Tanner Everett is sleeping with a man at night, that shit will get around fast. I should probably tell my mom and dad first.

Will they be surprised? Who the hell knows?

They already know I love Roo. Madly. So if they’re surprised by this change, I think I’ll have an answer to where my own stupidity comes from.

I text Roo after lunch and let him know my plans. He makes it very clear I don’t have to go announcing it when this thing is still so new, but fuck that. This has been a decade in the works. I don’t wanna wait any longer for people to know he’s mine.

Roo Williams is stuck with me now.

I finish my shift, and when I get out to my car, I find another text from Roo.

Roo: *There’s literally no hurry. What if something happens and you regret telling them?*

I laugh to myself. Now who's being dumb? If he hasn't worked out that this relationship is it for me, I'm gonna start to question who's really the smart one between us.

Tanner: *No matter what happens, there's nothing to regret. I give zero shits about people knowing that I'm in love with you. Let's face it, I've never been great at hiding it. I think everyone knew before I did anyway.*

And ain't that a bitch? That I was probably the last person in all of Sunbury to know how I felt about him. If I'd realized in high school, would he have left me?

Well, for the operation, yes. But would he have come right back? Did we lose years together because of how dumb I am at ... everything?

Fuck, I guess it doesn't matter now.

Now is the time to make sure I don't get to have any more of these regrets.

I hit Mom's number and hold my phone to my ear.

The time it takes her to answer feels like a lifetime, but it's probably only a couple of rings. I'm sure about my decision, but I'm also nervous as all hell.

Because I've *never* told Mom and Dad about a serious girlfriend, and here I am about to come out to them, I guess.

Yet, it doesn't feel like this is about that. Because Roo being a guy *really* doesn't feel like a big thing to me.

And maybe I shouldn't be doing this over the phone, but I've somehow managed to convince myself that: *a*, this shouldn't be a big deal, and *b*, I'd rather not see if they take the news badly. At least over the phone I can hang up and go home to Roo to make myself feel better.

"Hey, baby," Mom's chipper voice says when she answers. She's panting a little, and I'll bet she's run in

from the garden to get to her phone in time. “What are you doing?”

“Just got off work.” A yawn rips through me, stretching my mouth wide.

“You work too much,” she sings.

“And I will until the day I die,” I remind her.

She chuckles.

“Is Dad there?”

“Yeah, wanna talk to him?”

“Actually ...” Yeah, this is happening. “Can you put it on speaker? I wanna talk to you both together.”

I can hear the question in her silence, but after a short pause I make out the telltale sound of the phone being switched to speaker.

“Hey, Tan, what’s up?” Dad asks.

I focus on the dashboard, reminding myself of Roo’s countless messages telling me I don’t have to go through with this. I could easily bail out now and tell them I was calling to catch up, but nope. No. I’m doing this. “Umm, so, you know how Roo and I have been close for ... a while?”

Mom laughs. “Total understatement.”

It’s like I can hear Dad nodding.

“Right, well, about that.” I swallow. Mom and Dad have always loved Roo, but Dad has also said some pretty messed-up things about *them gays* he sees on TV. “We’re ... together.”

“Living together? We know.”

“That’s not what I—we’re *together*. Dating.” I hold my breath, almost sick at the thought of what they could say.

“I’m ... confused,” Dad says.

Mom’s silent.

I swallow.

“Is this a new thing?” Dad asks.

“W-what?”

“Weren’t you dating in high school? Isn’t that why he came back?”

All the air leaves me in a rush. “No. We only got together like a week ago.”

“Oh, Tanner,” Mom says. “You don’t need to hide it from us. We suspected you were dating during your senior year, and then when he left, you were so heartbroken. It basically proved it.”

I splutter. “I’m not hiding anything. Seriously. We only just got together.”

“But ...”

“A week. That’s it.” Officially, anyway. But Jesus, I thought they’d start questioning me about *why* we’re together, not *why* it’s only happened now. I knew a lot of folks in town made assumptions, but these are my *parents*.

“So, this is ...” I take a deep breath. “This is okay?”

Dad grunts. “You’re a good kid. It’s your life. And let’s just say, the only shocking part of this conversation is how Royce has waited all these years.”

I don’t have an answer for that either. It’s unbelievable to me that I got so lucky.

“Now to actual news,” Mom says. “The Sunflora Festival is only two weeks away. Text me your shifts at the station so I can come by and confirm a few things. And remind Royce I’ll expect his help. Now you’re properly dating, you can make sure he doesn’t slip out of it this year.”

“Ah, sure.”

Mom reminds me she loves me, and while I roll my eyes at her over-the-top show of support, I secretly love it. I end the call and sag against the driver’s seat. That was ... sort of exciting. Maybe I should feel more relief or

something? And while I know I just technically came out, it doesn't feel that way.

Neither of them asked about me being gay or bi or anything. They're ... them.

And I'm me.

And now there's no reason why Roo and I shouldn't tell the world.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT
ROO

There's sweet fuck all out there.

I hit refresh on the search bar, but when the page loads again, nothing has miraculously showed up this side of Portland, and the thought of a two hour bus commute each day is not fun. Since Tanner said he'd leave with me, I've wanted to find a way to make this work. He deserves it. *We* deserve it. And I know Tanner won't be happy anywhere but here.

The thing is, I studied for *years* to become an electrical engineer and staying in Sunbury means giving that all up.

Tanner's worth it. I mean, *duh*. My time spent pining over him triples how long I was at uni, but ... is it so wrong to want ambition *and* love?

I laugh at how lame I sound, even to myself.

Maybe we could compromise though?

I open a real estate site and start searching for houses. When Tanner mentioned buying a place together, I refused to think about it because *fuck* that sounds a thousand kinds of perfect. But if that's what he wants, let's do it.

As I suspected there's nothing in Sunbury except two apartments similar to the one we have now, which is fine, but Tanner specifically wants a house.

And there's a couple between here and Portland. Nothing's jumping out at me, and even if we moved halfway that's still an hour commute for *both* of us, and

after an all-night shift I don't want Tanner to have to drive that far.

How the hell do I make this work?

Tanner loves Sunbury.

I love Tanner.

We *both* want the careers we've worked our asses off for.

The sinking in my gut is trying to tell me it's impossible, but I can't give up.

Time to call in the cavalry, i.e. *Mom*, because if there's one thing I've learned about her, it's that she makes things happen. There should be plenty of time to squeeze in a call before Tanner gets home and tells me how things went with his parents.

I bookmark a few houses that look good between here and Portland, before I close the computer and mentally calculate the time difference between here and Sydney. I imagine she's up and getting ready for work already, and as the phone starts to ring, I push back the lingering guilt over not calling her more often.

"Royce, it's about time!"

I laugh. "Hello to you too."

"Hey, sweetheart. How is everything? All settled in?"

I called Mom when I first arrived to tell her how weird it was to be back, and we've texted back and forth a few times, but I haven't shared as much as I normally would. Because when it comes to me and Tanner, Mom's never held back her thoughts. "It's ... I think things are good."

"You think?"

"Well, you know I'm never exactly optimistic and peppy about things, but yeah. I'm happy."

"And you know that's all I want from you. So, figured out how long you'll be staying?"

“Ahh ...” Looks like we’re getting straight to the point. “I, maybe, might be staying.”

“Roy—”

“No, I am. I *am* staying.”

There’s a pause. “Because of Tanner?”

And that’s why I didn’t want to say anything. “Yes.”

“Royce ...” In one word she reminds me of all the years she’s spent dealing with my *Tanner obsession* as she calls it. I can’t blame her, my fixation on him in high school wasn’t exactly healthy, but things are different now. Well, I still love him maybe more than anyone, but now that things are actually possible between us, I’m not sick with want every time I look at him.

“Before you get started, I know what you’re thinking.”

She hums in a disbelieving way.

“I know you’ve always had high hopes for me, and I get it, but the thing is, I don’t need some big city life. I don’t need to travel and be constantly on the move. And I’m glad I’ve taken the last few years to try things out, because it’s helped me be more sure than ever, that all I want is Tanner and whatever kind of life we can have together.”

She lets out a long breath, and I know she’s disappointed. I know she’s fighting to stop from telling me that I’m not thinking logically, and that’s fine. I *know* I’m not. But if I could choose between spending a year experiencing more of Europe, or hiding away in this basically forgotten town, it’s no debate.

I’m not going anywhere.

“How is Tanner?” she finally asks. Because as much as she worries about me, she also loves him.

“Great. Just as amazing as ever. We’re ... I mean, we haven’t exactly labelled it, but we’re together.”

“Together?”

“Yes. As in he loves me too and we’re living together and things are amazing.”

“Royce.”

“Nope. No negativity allowed.”

She sighs. “All I’m saying is that you would both do anything to make the other person happy. Are you sure this is what he wants? You said he’s never even entertained the thought of being with a man, but here he is, suddenly ready to settle down with you?”

“Mom ...” I groan.

“I love you. I just want you to be careful, and *try* to think clearly for a moment. The only reason Tanner let you go the first time is because he knew you needed the surgery. I’ve never doubted you both love each other, but there’s a difference between platonic love and romantic love and I’m worried that poor boy is getting confused.”

My fist clenches on my thigh. “I’m not going to be an asshole because I know you’re doing your mom thing, but I *am* going to remind you I’m an adult, and neither of us is stupid.” I’m so done with people seeing Tanner that way. “I’ve heard your advice, I know you’re worried, but I have to do this. I’m not taking advantage of him wanting me to stay, and he’s not trying to manipulate me into being here. Is it really so unbelievable that I could be finally getting what I want?”

“Lower your voice, I hear you.” She lets out a short laugh. “I want this to work out as much as you do, hun. I love that boy, and I love you. *Nothing* would make me happier than to see you both together again, I only want you to be careful. You get so easily caught up in him, I want you to promise me you’ll make sure to build your own life too.”

“Fine.”

“Good.” Her tone softens. “I have to leave for work in a moment. You okay?”

“Of course I am.” Just feeling a little drained. “I really love him, Mom.”

“I know you do. And that’s what has me so worried.”

“Well ... you’re going to *love* this then.” I catch my lip with my teeth, suddenly unsure this is the time to mention it. “I’ve been looking at buying a place.”

“Well, that’s great—”

“With Tanner.”

“What?” She cuts off and when she talks again, I can tell she’s forcing her calm, management voice. “You’ve been back there a month. Buying a house with someone is a stressful process. Why don’t you wait? Just enjoy the relationship a little longer and make sure things are good before you move ahead on something like that?”

“Your advice to me is *always* to wait. And yeah, you’re usually right. But you weren’t right about time helping me to get over him, and sorry, but you’re not right about this one.”

“Do you have any idea how frustrating it is to let you make your own choices when they’re not ones I’d make for you?” She groans. “Fine. How much do you need?”

As much as I’d love to hit my parents up for the down payment, I know Tanner would never go for it. He’s way more ethical than I am, and he’s proud of the money he’s saved so far.

“Actually ...” I cringe. “Nothing. We’re going to buy a shithole and do it up, and Tanner will see that as an accomplishment or some shit. I don’t know.”

“We have the money.”

“I know that. But this is me being mature.”

“Well ... okay.”

“What I *did* hope you could help with, is reaching out to your contacts and friends who are still around here and see if they know of anything that will come up for sale in Sunbury. There’re a few places out of town, but Tanner moving doesn’t feel right, and if I’m honest ... I don’t completely hate it here.”

“Did I see a pig fly?”

I smile. “Yeah, it snuck up on me too.”

“Sure, I’ll ask around, and hope like hell this all works out for you. I love you so much, Royce.”

“I *know*, Mom.” I roll my eyes and smile. “I love you too.”

We hang up, and I feel so much lighter after getting it all out there. But I was right that Mom wouldn’t hold back her thoughts. And they were hard to hear.

Because some of them might not be too far from the truth. She’s oddly astute, my mom.

And even though the main point of our conversation was to find somewhere for Tanner and I to live happily and forever and all that shit, my cynical brain only latched onto one key part.

That Tanner would do anything to make me stay.

That somehow I’m influencing this sudden bi awakening, and not in a good way.

I push the dumb thoughts away because I refuse to let them take over my rare happiness.

Unfortunately, it might be too late.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE
TANNER

I'm still high from sharing the news with my parents and the thought of going home to relax doesn't seem right. I want to grab Roo and go *do* something. Something where I can claim him as mine.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I text Jules to see what she and Mitch are doing tonight. Then Circus, Leon, Dahlia, and Rafe.

If I wanted to tell my parents first that we're a thing, our friends are a close second.

Roo's waiting for me when I pull up on the street outside the apartment, forehead creased with confusion.

"So this is random ..." he says as he climbs in my truck.

I tug him closer until his lips meet mine. "I told them."

"Fuck. And?"

My laugh takes me by surprise. "They were confused."

"Uh-oh."

"Because they thought we'd been together since high school."

"What?" Roo's laughter joins mine. "They were okay?"

"They treated it like old news. Mom was more interested in talking about Sunflora."

"Are we actually going to surprise anyone?"

“You mean besides me?” I grin and squeeze his thigh. “We’re gonna find out.”

“Should I be scared?”

“Nope. Jules and Mitch are having people over again, and we’re going. As a couple.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “Did you knock your head today?”

“No harder than usual.”

“Then—”

“Roo.” I steer the truck back out onto the road. “I’ve never been embarrassed by you before, and I’m still not. If you don’t wanna tell them, it’s cool; we won’t. But I’m pretty sure it’s gonna be a non-event.”

He scowls. “They’re going to want us to talk about emotions, and I can’t do that with anyone but you. It’s gross.”

“Yeah, God forbid you be vulnerable for a second.” But that’s one of the many things I love about him. How closed off he is to everyone but me. “If it helps, I don’t think it’ll play out that way.”

“So how are you picturing it happening?”

“We’ll walk in holding hands, there’ll be some dumbass jokes we’ll brush off like always, and then I’ll fuck you on the kitchen table.”

Roo makes a choking noise. “Well, that’ll definitely surprise *some* people.”

And yet, he doesn’t say no. He knows me well enough to know I’d never share his naked body with anyone. Nope, no way. All mine.

I feel freer than I ever have by the time we pull up in front of Jules’s place.

And as soon as we’re out of the car, I link our fingers together.

“You nervous?” Roo asks.

“Nah, not really.”

“Good.” He presses against my chest as he arches up to kiss me.

I hum against his mouth. “And look at that, nerves all gone.”

Raspy laughter makes me jerk around to find Circus coming down the road. He starts a slow clap that seems way too loud in the gathering dusk. “About Goddamn time.”

“I’ll say,” Roo throws back.

They hug, which forces me to drop his hand, but I quickly snatch it back up again when they’re done.

“Does this mean I can count on you sticking around?” Circus asks.

Warmth fills my chest, until I catch the look on Roo’s face.

“We haven’t had a chance to talk about that yet.”

Talk about ... what? The happy vibes I’ve been building all day crash. I mean, we’re together now. That should be enough. But the thought of leaving my home seems too big to confront.

I swallow back the sudden panic. One thing at a time.

Relationship first.

Here or not, Roo is mine, and it’s time I finally caught up with what everyone else already knows.

We’re the last to show up, and when Jules leads us inside, I’m happy to find Rafe and Laura have made it this time. I have no idea what’s up with them, but tonight they’re sharing an armchair and they’re both smiling, so I’m assuming things are good again. For now.

“Oh my goodness.” Mitch jolts upright from where he was pouring some champagne and points in our direction. “Is this actually happening?”

I lift Roo’s hand and press my lips to it.

Jules squeals and launches herself at us, while Leon looks on like he can't work out what all the fuss is about.

"I thought we already decided this was a thing?"

Mitch shakes his head. "We did, but they hadn't yet. Kind of important, man."

"Huh." He nods. "Congrats, then."

"Are you fucking *shitting* me?" We all turn in the direction of Rafe's voice. "Am I the only one who didn't think this was inevitable?"

"Rafe, sweetie—"

He cuts Jules off. "You're *straight*, dude." He lets out an off-pitch laugh. "Straight dudes don't randomly decide they like dick. They just *don't*, okay?"

He doesn't sound all the way angry, but his tone is pissing me off. "What the f—"

Roo yanks me back. "Nope, we're not touching that."

"What do you mean?"

"Am I seriously the *only* straight guy here?" Rafe gives that weird laugh again.

"What the hell do you call Leon?"

Silence meets my words.

It's Leon's turn to look awkward as he lifts a large hand my way. "Gay as fuck."

"Oh. Mitch, then?"

Rafe jerks upright, and Laura scrambles to keep her feet. "From the old group, I mean. You were *supposed* to get with Piper. *Supposed* to do the whole wedding and kids and be the perfect family in town. That's what was *supposed* to happen."

"Who the hell are you to tell me—"

Roo shoves me back again. "We're still not going there."

"I think we should go," Laura hurries to say. Rafe shrugs off her attempt to take his hand and storms out of

the room.

“I’m so sorry,” she says before running after him.

All I catch is her asking, “ ... embarrass me *again?*” before the front door slams.

It’s so quiet in here I swear I can hear the bubbles in the champagne Mitch is still loosely holding. That’s *not* how tonight was meant to go. At all.

Rafe’s one of our oldest friends. If he didn’t have an issue with Roo or Leon being gay, or with Circus being pan, why the hell is he suddenly flipping his shit over *me?*

“Umm ...” Mitch is looking at the bottle he’s holding like he’s in shock. Jules takes it and pats his arm.

“Who wants to play Charades?” she asks.

I shake my head. “What the hell was that?”

Leon and Circus share a look, but Jules is the one who answers.

“We’ve always had pretend bets going on when you two would get together, but he’s been adamant it would never happen. I don’t know what he’s thinking, but you know Rafe. Explodes first, thinks second. He’ll be over it by tomorrow.”

I’m not sure I *want* him to be. If that’s how he’s going to react to me being happy, he can go fuck himself.

I loop my arm around Roo’s neck and pull him close enough to kiss his head. “Love you,” I mutter, more to remind myself than to tell him. Because after finding out Roo still isn’t sure about staying, and having Rafe behave like an asshole, I just don’t know what I’m feeling anymore.

“Love you too.”

CHAPTER THIRTY
ROO

What a dick.

I don't know what the hell is going through Rafe's head, but I *do* know I wanted to kill him. Seeing how it upset Tanner made me feel all stabby, but I know there's more going on there than he probably said.

All that *supposed to* bullshit? Yeah, that guy's feeling pressure from someone.

Laura's the most obvious choice, but surely there's no way in hell she'd be pushing him to get married or anything dumb like that. First, we're way too young for that shit. And second, they *always* fight. God, I haven't even been around and I know that.

I leave the others, and go to take a leak and grab another drink that I really don't feel like drinking.

Since I seized out last week, I haven't felt quite right. My limbs are sort of heavy, and I find myself staring at nothing. The bounce back is normally faster than this, and I'm worried I'm going to seize out again.

That's the last thing I need right now if I want to get Tanner off my back.

"Hey, Royce." Leon joins me in the kitchen and pops open a new bottle of beer. Like Tanner, I hadn't known he was gay. I guess a few things *did* change while I was away.

"Hey, daddy bear."

His laugh is deep. "Not the first time I've been called that."

“And I doubt it will be the last.” If his big hairy forearms are any indication, anyway. “How is that contract going?”

“It’s ...” He cringes. “Going. I try not to think about it unless I have to.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’m getting worried I’ve taken on too much. There are a lot of moving pieces, and a *lot* of people to hire.”

My ears perk up at that and suddenly I have an amazing idea. “It’s in Port Welling, right?”

“Yep.”

“And any chance you’ve already got an electrical engineer on board?”

His eyes narrow a little as he looks me up and down. “That’s what you studied back in Australia?”

“Sure is.”

“Hmm ...”

“Oh man, you’re killing me here.”

Leon laughs. “Do you have any experience outside of your degree?”

“Of course.” The fact he’s entertaining my random idea shoots a surge of adrenaline through my system. “I’ve done work experience with a few companies, and right before I went around Europe, I was working for a developer in Sydney. I have references if you need them.”

“I don’t.” He smiles, which makes his stormy green eyes friendly. “Think you can get across Oregon building codes?”

“No problem.”

“I *was* going to hire a company to design the electrical systems. Think you can work with them on the plans and then run some of my other engineers through?”

“Of course.” I hope. It sounds like a big job and I’m conscious that any screw-ups will be on Leon for the

most important contract he's ever had. I guess I just can't screw up.

"I've got to admit, it'd be good to work with someone I know."

A relieved smile breaks across my face. "For real?"

"Job's yours if you want it. I'd love to cross another position off my list."

"I do." I hold out my hand, and Leon shakes it firmly.

"Sweet. I'll be heading up to the site tomorrow. Don't feel pressured or locked in, just come down for a couple of hours, we can talk plans, and if you feel like it's a fit, we can sign the contracts."

Yes, yes, and more yes. "I like the sound of that."

He slaps me on the back. "Congrats, Royce. Your first job as a contractor."

"Thanks, and ... let's keep this quiet from Tanner. Until it's a done deal."

He looks surprised but agrees.

Leon returns to join the others, and I turn it over. A contractor? I've never considered working for myself. The whole point of my degree was to find a permanent position somewhere. But permanent doesn't always equal flexibility, and if this goes well with Leon, he might use me for future builds.

I don't *need* to work—my parents will give me whatever money I ask for—but I'd sure as hell like to anyway.

And being a contractor would mean setting my own hours, going after jobs I actually want, and if I do take on a job in Portland—or even farther—it would only mean temporary time away.

Holy shit, I could make this work.

I could stay in bumass Sunbury, with Tanner, and still work a job I love.

For the first time in my entire life, I can picture myself here. Permanently.

I'm buzzing with the need to tell Tanner, but there's a chance I'll get out to the site and hate it, and then all that excitement will be for nothing.

If I'm staying, I want to be totally, completely sure I can make it work first.

And fuck. I'll do whatever I have to in order to make it work.

Tanner leaves for the station early the next morning, and I crawl out of bed not much later.

And motherfucker, I feel like shit.

I force myself through showering and getting dressed and somehow even manage a few bites of toast.

Leon picks me up at seven thirty, and we drive to the site at Port Welling. He's in a good mood for someone who's usually way quieter than the rest of us.

Though I guess I'm usually pretty quiet too, so someone has to carry the conversation.

And that someone will not be me today.

"You doing okay?"

"Yeah, totally." Totally *not*. But this is probably the best offer I'm going to get, so no way am I going to blow this. "How much farther?"

"Almost there."

It takes less than twenty minutes to get from Sunbury to the site we're working on, and it's an easy drive. No main roads or heavy congestion, and buses run between the two towns regularly. Even better.

I'm even more excited now.

And as Leon walks me around the site and refers to the rough plans he's started to put together, my excitement ramps up to the next level. It's still very early in the process, and Leon still needs to work with an architect—and me—and about thirty other people before it's all in place, but looking across the bare lot, imagining a huge building I helped make happen ...

My head spins a little.

“Where do I sign?”

Leon takes me to a café for lunch, and we go over the paperwork. I'm not really sure what's involved, and I can't tell if I'm not following what's happening because we're going through it so fast or because my brain is completely unfocused.

“*Royce?*”

“Huh? Sorry, what?”

Leon gives me a look. “You sure you're okay? You keep spacing out on me.”

That doesn't sound good. My gut twists as I realize there's a very good chance I've been seizing out all day.

And like hell am I going to say that to him.

“Sorry, back to the contract.”

The last thing I want is to rush him and have him pick up on something not being right, but I also really need to go.

There's a panicky feeling gripping my chest, because while I might play off the seizures as an annoying inconvenience, I'm actually afraid of them.

Afraid of how they come from nowhere. Can kick in at any point. I hate the control they take from me and the way they make me feel so fucking vulnerable.

Especially these kinds. The silent kind that most people don't even know about. That *I* don't even really know have happened until it's pointed out to me.

Even as Leon goes over some of the finer points, the dates, all I can concentrate on is getting home to Tanner and having him wrap me in his arms. It's the only place in the whole world I feel safe.

This job or not, how do I leave that?

The short answer is, I don't.

I need him. And I'm okay with needing him.

"You know what, that sounds pretty straightforward." I slide the contract to my side of the table and do something that would make Mom's head explode. I sign the thing with absolutely zero clue what I'm signing.

Here's hoping Leon's a good guy.

"Do you mind if we go? You're right, I am feeling a bit off today."

He stares at me a moment. "Yeah, probably a good idea."

"Thanks." I push to my feet, and Leon heads for the counter to pay.

It's pure relief to think that in half an hour I'll be back home in our little apartment. Tanner's still hours away from being finished with work, but as soon as he walks in that door, he'll take care of me, and I'll tell him I'm staying, and everything will be fan-fucking-tastic.

I'm almost at the café door, when it suddenly feels like I've stopped walking and my body is continuing without me.

This weird, floaty feeling hits me.

And the last thing I hear is a sickening *thunk* before I'm out.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE
TANNER

Holy fucking shit. My heart is in my throat as I head for the medical offices in town. Leon said it wasn't an emergency, but Roo being checked over for a concussion is *always* an emergency in my book.

I have no idea what he was doing with Leon, or in Port Welling, but apparently he's okay, so that's all that matters to me.

Dr. Grivick is clearly expecting me because Cam, his admin, sends me straight through to the back. Since Sunbury doesn't have a hospital, Grivick is it, and his office has been kitted out with every piece of equipment he can get his hands on.

Roo's sitting up on the bed, and he looks *pissed*, which is really only one step up from the expression Leon's wearing.

"What happened?" I demand, stalking closer.

Roo won't meet my eye. "Seized out again. It's nothing. This is all a giant waste of time."

"Your health is never a waste of time," Dr. Grivick says. He has a way of sounding soothing and chastising at the same time.

"Seconded. Now how the hell did you hit your head?"

"On a chair."

"Okay, someone needs to start from the beginning." It's moments like these I hate my brain and inability to keep up.

Roo groans. “We were having lunch, I seized out as we left, and hit my head. It was nothing, but Leon insisted on bringing me here.”

“Because that lump makes you look like a big gay unicorn.”

Roo flips him off and runs the other hand over a very obvious bulge on the side of his head.

“Jesus, Roo ...”

Grivick crosses his arms. “Normally bumps to the head aren’t a huge deal, but since I know Royce’s history, I also know how serious it could have been.”

“Could have, but wasn’t,” he fires back.

“It *looked* serious,” Leon mutters.

“They always do,” I agree.

Roo’s sigh is heavy, and I get why he’s annoyed at all this attention, but for fuck’s sake, I’m allowed to worry.

“How serious could it have been?”

“Any kind of knock to the head after a brain operation needs to be looked at thoroughly. Royce is a few years post-op, and the hit wasn’t too bad, but seizures are unpredictable.”

“Mmhmm ...”

“Royce!”

“What, Tanner? I know all this shit. I’ve heard about nothing else for the last five years and even longer. I hate being treated with kid gloves.”

“No one’s treating you with kid gloves. Everyone in this room only wants to make sure you’re okay. That’s not a crime.”

“And I am. I’ve sat here like a good boy and been checked out, and literally all I want is to go home.”

I’m mad at him for not taking this seriously, but when he looks at me like that ... I get it. I get exactly where he’s coming from because I’ve been there with him since the beginning. He’s told me every little thought he’s

ever had about how his epilepsy makes him feel, and I've always struggled between giving him what he wants and making the smart decision.

"Is he allowed to go?"

"He is." Dr. Grivick eyes Roo. "I'd recommend he gets some kind of ID, though. A medi bracelet or necklace. If Leon had taken him somewhere in Port Welling instead, or if he hadn't been with Leon at all, well ..." Grivick shrugs. "EMTs and nurses and doctors are only human, Royce. We can't treat what we don't know about."

Roo's pouting now, because he knows the doctor is right. My hissing little kitten has retreated, and I know Roo's exhaustion has well and truly kicked in.

Leon and I wait outside while Grivick discharges Roo.

"That was scary, man," Leon says. "I mean, he's been a bit spacey all day, but I thought he was just feeling conflicted over the job."

"What job?"

Leon's eyebrows jump up. "He hasn't told you yet?"

"I had no idea you were even meeting up." I refuse to let the little spark of hope take hold. "You offered him a job?"

"I did. And he signed, but I'm seriously questioning whether he even knew what was happening. We'll probably have to go over it all again."

I'm only half following. "You okay?"

"Yeah, it threw me for a second. I saw it happen once or twice at school, but I don't think you're ever prepared when it kicks in. And honestly, I had no clue what the hell to do. If it had lasted much longer, I would have called an ambulance."

"I'm just glad you were there."

Leon leaves, and after assuring Grivick that I'll be home all afternoon and night to keep an eye on Roo, he

finally lets us leave.

Roo is sulking. He barely even looks at me as we walk to the car, and while this mood is an attempt to try and force my distance, it makes me want to say fuck the distance and crush him up against me.

But I know the mood won't last long.

He's too tired to keep it up, and as much as he pretends he hates emotion, he's also way too needy not to want my attention.

I wait until we've driven home and walked back inside before I bring up what I've been wanting to say since we were at the doctor's office.

"So ..."

He slams into me, arms around my waist and face buried in my chest. "Not right now," comes his muffled voice.

"I know you're tired, but—"

"Later."

"Roo."

"*Tan.*"

I ease him off me and steer him toward the couch. He's so tired, he's like putty in my hands. "You can't keep avoiding it. I know you hate those bracelets. I *know*. But dammit, Roo. Today could have been so much worse."

"I was fine when I—"

"Traveled around Europe, went to uni, lived in Australia ... I get it. You *were* fine. You were also fine today. But all it takes is one moment where you're *not* fine, and I will not wait until then to be like, *Oops, maybe you should have been wearing one.*"

He stares at his hands and doesn't answer.

"I'm not letting it drop this time."

"You're like a dog with a bone," he mutters.

"Because it's important."

“It’s not important. I don’t *need* it.”

“But *I* do. I can’t constantly worry about what’s going on with you when you’re not with me. I can’t carry that to the station with me or to work. I need to know you’re okay if something like this happens again.”

He sneers. “The bracelet isn’t going to protect me.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m an idiot. I know that won’t happen. But there’s a reason they exist, and since your seizures are so infrequent and impossible to predict, you probably need it *more* now than when they were happening regularly.”

Roo glares across the room. “They’re annoying.”

“*You’re* annoying.”

His glare turns to me instead. “Can we talk about what *I* need? Because that’s you not busting your ass at a volunteer position all week. It’s you going to your boss and getting the help you need. It’s you not constantly underestimating yourself, not holding yourself back from trying in case you don’t get it anyway.”

“This isn’t about me!”

“Wake up, Tanner. It’s the same damn thing. I hate the fucking bracelets because they’re a constant reminder of how easily my brain can mess up on me; they mark me as different and make people think they can question me. I *hate* it. The reason you won’t ask for help is because it makes you feel vulnerable, and news flash, it’s the exact same for me.”

I sink onto the couch beside him, and even though we’re arguing right now, he immediately wriggles closer. “We’re talking about your health. That’s way different.”

“And you don’t think your health will be affected if you keep working yourself into the ground?”

I hate how easily he turns things around on me. How easily he can outsmart me. I’m lucky he only does it when it’s important.

“I get it,” I finally say.

“Good.”

He shifts closer, and I wrap my arm around him. When he flicks my nose, I smile, knowing this argument is over. “We didn’t actually resolve anything,” I point out to him.

His front teeth tug at his bottom lip. “Maybe ... Maybe we should make a deal.”

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO
ROO

I'm trying really hard not to be a big baby about this, especially since it was my idea.

"Maybe I should order a bracelet after all."

Tanner laughs from the driver's seat of his truck. "Scared?"

"Tattoos hurt, right?"

"Dunno, don't have any." He pinches my arm. "You'll be able to tell me in about an hour."

I scowl.

"This is so exciting. I'm gonna have a sexy, tatted-up boyfriend."

That gets a smile.

"You're gonna look so badass." He shifts slightly in his seat, which *really* makes me smile.

"Wait ... Tanner Everett, Sunbury's golden boy, is turned on by *tattoos*?" He starts going red, and I can't get enough. This is too precious. "You know ... they say you can't stop at one. I might end up with a whole sleeve."

"Roo, if you keep talking like that, we might not even make it to the tattooist."

I reach over and run my hand up his thigh. Because I can. "Maybe that's the plan."

"Nope." His hand closes over mine, and he links our fingers together. "You know I'm not forcing you to do

this. You can pull out if you're really that uncomfortable."

And there's my sweet Tanner back.

He can say I don't have to go through with this all he likes; we both know that's not true. Yeah, I could do the bracelet thing again, but they're annoying. They snag on shit and get in the way, and people are always so fucking nosy. Circus is right that most people are used to seeing tattoos, so they fade into the background.

I don't need to remember it, I don't need to be careful, and if something *does* happen—and damn Tanner for making me think that way in the first place—at least people will know.

Still, even though I guess my health is important and all that, it's not what's driving me to do this.

If I get my tattoo, Tanner requests help. And I'll sure as hell march down there and demand it myself if he chickens out.

Interfering little shit? Why, thank you, I am.

The grumpy fog is starting to lift a little as we reach Camden. Sunbury doesn't have a tattoo parlor, and the one in Camden isn't exactly busy, so I'm not sure what to expect.

Thankfully, when we walk inside and check the place out, it's clean and the tattooist seems friendly enough. He and Tanner hit it off as I walk around the room, looking at the art he has displayed.

"I'm Layne," the tattooist says. "Roo, huh? You getting an Australian animal by any chance?"

Tanner starts to laugh, and I'm surprised he lets the Roo thing slide since he's never let anyone else call me that before.

I open the photos on my phone and show Layne a screenshot of the design I want: a hexagon with a red Star of Life inside and the word *epileptic* in the middle. Because you know, I've been so worried about being

labelled *the sick kid*, I'm going and literally doing just that.

"Oh, cool, man. Yeah, I've done one of these before. Diabetic, though. I love that they're getting popular and more recognized."

That was one of the selling points for me. After Circus mentioned it, I wanted to make sure that it would help and not just be a pointless tattoo. Because if that was the case, I might as well get a fucking butterfly.

Ooh, watch Tanner get hot over that.

"Sure you don't want one?" I ask Tanner as Layne leads me into a back room set up with benches and beds that remind me way too much of the doctor's office to be comfortable.

I guess this is really happening.

I'm not sure why it's only hitting me now, but hey, I'm here. And I'm definitely not someone who backs down, no matter how much I might want to.

Instead, I swallow back the doubt, and the slimy feeling that this is *forever*, and plant my stubborn ass in the chair.

"So, kangaroo, where are we doing this thing?"

I point to my wrist, and he gives my arm a quick once-over before heading for a computer.

"Still okay?" Tanner asks.

I'm not answering that. I want to look cool in front of Layne, thanks. "You know what, I think you want me to back out."

"I don't think I've ever wanted anything less."

"*Sure* you do. Because if I back out, you get to as well."

Tanner laughs and runs a big hand over his face. "I can't believe you've talked me into it."

"And you better follow through."

"I will."

“Good. Otherwise I’ll have Layne tattoo *I can’t read* on your forehead.”

“Definitely not doing that,” Layne says as he returns. “Consent’s important.”

“Yeah, kangaroo.”

I snort and flip Tanner off. “Let’s get on with it, then. I give you consent.”

He applies the stencil, and it actually looks kind of cool. Tanner’s gaze traces it, then continues up my arm until he meets my eyes. He gives me one of his soft smiles, all for me, and it relaxes the anxiousness in my gut.

Layne sets up, and then he doesn’t fuck around. The first stab of the needle makes me jolt, and I immediately regret all the decisions that led me to this point.

Okay, so maybe it doesn’t *really* hurt, but I’m a total wimp.

I force down a shallow breath and remind myself to be cool. It’s only a teeny needle, and by the looks of Layne, he’s done this approximately a thousand times.

And thank God for when he moves on from the part he was working on, because it becomes a whole lot more bearable. I relax a little, finally able to breathe normally again.

“Hurt?” Tanner asks.

“Nah, not at all.” I’m talking out of my ass. “Just a tickle. I don’t know what all the fuss is about.”

Layne snorts. I’m ready for him to call me on my bullshit, but he stays silent, which is probably a good thing because he passes over a bone and I have to clamp my jaw closed again.

The color doesn’t feel a whole lot better either.

How people get addicted to this is beyond me. Tanner can kiss that sleeve goodbye.

When he finally finishes, it takes all my energy to focus on smiling and thanking him as I pay. The minute we're out the doors, I cradle my arm to my chest.

“Motherfucking *ouch!*”

Tanner laughs.

“That was basically torture.”

“Need me to kiss it better?”

“You touch it, you die.”

Tanner shakes with suppressed laughter. “You're so tough today.”

“Tease all you like. Which of the two of us spent an hour being repeatedly stabbed?”

I reach the truck and wait for Tanner to unlock it, but he crowds in behind me instead. Thankfully there's no one around as he rocks his hard dick against my ass. “I've never seen health and safety look so hot.”

“Maybe I should run a class,” I answer dryly.

“I'd sign up. Even better if you taught it naked.”

And look at that, the pain suddenly doesn't feel so bad. I push back against him. “How about I let you kiss other things better?”

His teeth find my ear. “Tell me where it hurts.”

“Home. Now.”

We both hurry into the truck, but Tanner being Tanner, he won't go a mile over the speed limit the whole way home. No matter how much I palm his dick.

By the time we're back at the apartment, we're both so needy, we barely make it into the bedroom, let alone the bed. Tanner shoves me face-first into the wall and presses his hard cock against my ass.

“So much room for activities,” he breathes. “Stay here.”

Tanner disappears, and I hear him yank open the drawer of his side table. His pants hit the floor, and I

quickly shove mine down and kick out of them, not wanting anything to hold this up.

I glance over my shoulder in time to see Tanner slicking lube over his bare cock, and I have to bite back a groan. It's about fucking time.

“You ready?”

“Fuck me.” *Fuckmefuckmefuckme*. I need him inside me so bad.

He takes just enough time to stretch me out, and then he's there, the blunt head of his cock pushing against my hole. It slips inside, and I sink my teeth into my knuckles as he eases in deeper.

His groan rumbles in my ear. “You feel so good. This is ... This is ...”

Complete perfection.

I had no idea one thin piece of rubber made so much difference, but as Tanner picks up the pace and owns my hole with his bare cock over and over, my brain checks out. He plasters his chest to my back and reaches forward to link his fingers through mine with one hand before wrapping his other around my aching cock.

I work myself back onto his dick, over and over, needing more.

“You look so sexy right now,” he pants. “So hot and so tight. My Roo. My hole. All mine.”

The words are everything I've ever wanted and more. I can't hold back. I explode over his hand and the wall, and Tanner grabs my hips and pounds into me. He stiffens a moment later, and his cock starts to throb, shooting his cum deep inside my ass.

I melt against him as he hugs me close and lightly kisses my neck while he catches his breath, and fuck me, if this is what life is like with Tanner, sign me up.

I'm not going anywhere.

And dear God, please let him feel the same.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE
TANNER

Once I get to the station, I head straight for the chief's office. This is the last thing I want to do, but I made Roo a promise, so I figure it's time for me to step up and stop being the dumbass everyone sees me as. There's still three months until the full-time role is up for grabs, and damn it, this time it's gotta be mine.

I tap on his office door, and he calls for me to enter.

"Hey, Tanner, take a seat."

I cross the office and do as he says before quickly wiping my sweaty palms on my pants. "Thanks for seeing me, sir."

"Anytime." He narrows his eyes at me. "What did you want to talk about?"

Right to it, then. Fantastic. I'd been planning on a bit of small talk to either ease me into it or to give me a chance to change my mind.

"Did you, umm, manage to get funding for another firefighter?"

He studies me. "I did."

"Okay." I could easily leave it there, but then I picture how proud Roo will be when I tell him I finally did this, and it forces more words out. "I'll be applying again."

"I'm glad to hear it." He pauses. "And what are you going to do about the test?"

My breath rushes out of me in a *whoosh*. "That's why I'm here. I, ah ..." I rub my head. "I'll need some

help with it.”

“What sort of help?”

“I ... To read it.”

His dark eyes widen. “You need help with reading?”

I force myself to nod. “I can’t read. Well, I mean, I *can*. I can read words, a sentence even, but anything more than that, I’m lost. The words disappear from my brain.”

“I don’t understand. You did a test to become a volunteer.”

I grin. “We both know that test was kinda bullshit. It was about listing basic steps, and it was multiple choice. You were never gonna let me not pass; I’ve been helping out here unofficially since I was a punk kid.”

“You were never a punk kid.”

“Aw, and now you’re being nice.”

He laughs deep in his chest. “So ... why haven’t you mentioned this before?”

“I was embarrassed. I didn’t want people to find out and treat me any different.”

“Who would treat you differently?”

“That’s the thing. I have no clue. But it’s happened before, and I don’t doubt it will happen again.”

“Not in my station it won’t.”

I smile. “Thank you.”

“Nothing to thank me for. You don’t have to tell anyone either. When it’s time for testing, we’ll make plans then.”

Relief washes over me. “T-thank you. Just, so much.”

“Can I ask, why now? What changed your mind about asking for help?”

“There’s a guy who’s maybe the strongest person I ever met. And he finally stopped being stubborn and did

what was best for himself. If he can do it, there's no reason why I can't too."

"I'm glad to hear it. Let me guess, you're talking about the best friend?"

I go to confirm it immediately, then hesitate. "Actually ... Well, yes, but also ..." Should I tell him? He's a pretty fair boss, and he took the reading help well, but there's a big difference between needing help to read a test and dating a guy. I'm not about to assume everyone will be okay with it. "He's my boyfriend."

The chief's eyebrows well and truly hit his hairline. "Well, then."

"I haven't told anyone here yet."

"But you plan to?"

"I ... Is that okay?"

"Yes, of course," he hurries to say. "That's your business, isn't it? And I'd like to think I've hired some pretty okay men, but it goes without saying to be careful."

"I will. But I think you've hired some pretty okay guys too."

I feel like I'm high as I leave his office and make my way into the living quarters. I'm seeing the place in a whole new light as I realize there's a very real possibility this is my future. If I can understand the test, there's no reason why I shouldn't ace it. I did okay in school with the assistance, and this is stuff I actually know.

Pauly's doing sit-ups when I walk in, and Jones is laying into a punching bag. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell them now, but I hold off. We're close for work friends, sure, but it's not something they need to know. Especially since my position here isn't certain. Yet.

I can't wait to get home and tell Roo I finally did what he's been pushing me to.

"All right, who's getting lunch?" Chief asks, following me into the room. He hands over his credit card.

“I guess that would be me, then.”

“I’ll come,” Pauly says, jumping up from the floor. Jones keeps pounding the bag as he calls over his shoulder for a burger.

It’s a nice day out, not cold at all, and we decide to walk down to the burger house and carry the stuff back.

Except, as soon as we walk in, Mom and the whole festival planning committee are there. Along with Roo. They wave us over, and Pauly and I share a quick look before answering her summons.

“Now, you boys are all organized for next Saturday, correct? The firehouse will be open, and the trucks will be on show after they’ve finished in the parade.”

I press my lips together before reassuring her for the *twentieth* time that we know what we’re doing, and then let Pauly take over. Sunflora happens every year, and from a fireman’s perspective, not a whole lot has changed. We open up, we show the kids how to use the hose, run some basic fire training for people who have signed up, answer the standard questions on how to make it a career, and let kids climb all through the trucks.

Though, I’ve gotta hand it to her. She does *not* let Sunbury being a small town hold back her plans.

“You know if there’s an emergency, we have to go, right?” I clarify, because I’m not so sure she does know that.

She waves a hand. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

Well, if she’s *sure* ...

She jots something down in her notebook but doesn’t look too worried. Pauly and I exchange a look, wondering if we can get out of this conversation now, when Mom turns back to me.

“Look who I finally got ahold of,” she says, patting Roo’s hand.

The smile he sends me looks more like a cringe.
“Couldn’t keep me away.”

“Mmhmm.” Mom sounds skeptical as hell. “And it has nothing to do with you wanting to impress your future mother-in-law.”

Pauly’s head snaps toward me, and my spine feels like it locks up. I clear my throat. “We’ve gotta get back.” I send a smile Roo’s way, desperately wanting to kiss him goodbye, but he’s sandwiched between Mom and Lori Taylor, eyes begging me to help him escape.

Dear fucking God.

I mouth *sorry* and try not to feel guilty when I leave him there.

Pauly’s stare burns into the side of my face as we approach the long counter. Surprisingly, Piper isn’t the one taking orders. Instead, the man serving is—

“Rowan, hey.”

“Tanner.” He nods in our direction and plucks the pencil from behind his ear. Rowan was a year above me in school, and he’s, well, almost unrecognizable. Longish hair, buff, and tattoos down both arms. He’s far from Piper’s preppy, jock older brother.

We place our orders, Rowan heads off out back, and it’s not until I’m alone with Pauly again that I realize I still have his full attention.

“Really?” he finally says. “We’re both going to pretend what your mom just said wasn’t weird?”

“The festival stuff? I know. You’d think we’ve done it enough times now to know what’s going on.”

His stare doesn’t drop.

I huff. “The mother-in-law stuff?”

“Is that ...” He steps forward and leans in. “Is that the usual gossipy shit?”

He’s giving me a pretty easy out. Technically, Roo and I wouldn’t have to say shit to anyone, and they’d

make all their own conclusions anyway. But I don't want it to be like that. Still, Pauly's reaction isn't exactly filling me with confidence.

"Ah ... not so much." I shrug, trying to play it off while I'm *literally* starting to sweat. "That'd probably be cool one day."

He glances around really quick, then leans closer. "You guys are a thing?"

"Yep." I take a breath. "That a problem?"

He hurriedly backs up. "Nah, man. Totally cool."

"It better be."

Rowan calls our order, and I step forward to grab it, declining Pauly's offer to help. We're halfway back down O'Connell Road, when there's a sudden screech of tires. I jump at the blare of a horn and a loud *yowl* followed by the ginger stray darting past.

"Fucking thing." Pauly shakes his head.

I shove our lunch at him.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"To make sure the stupid bastard is okay."

I jog into the alley between the burger house and the pharmacy and look around. There's a giant dumpster, a few neatly stacked crates, and down the end, a flash of ginger. I head in that direction to a gap in the wall and find the stray glaring back at me.

And ... now I dunno what to do next.

The cat is curled in on itself, and doesn't look happy, but I don't *think* it's injured. I'm no expert, though, am I?

I watch for a little longer, still unsure what to do next, when footsteps sound behind me.

"Shove over," Pauly says. "I brought reinforcements."

Margot, Sunbury's only vet, sets down the cat carrier and peers inside. "Let's see if he's hungry."

Silence falls around us, and I spend the time while we wait looking everywhere but at Pauly. He's trying to catch my eye. I don't make it easy on him.

After a few minutes, the cat's head pokes out, and then she stalks forward and into the cage. Margot is quick to snap the door closed. "Might be the easiest catch I've made."

A loud hiss answers her, and as Margot glances in, something catches her eye.

"What is it? He hurt?"

"Actually ... He's a *she*. Which almost never happens with ginger cats." Margot turns back to the gap and shines her phone light inside. "Tanner come here."

I crouch down and try to see what she's—

"A kitten!"

She shifts the light.

"*Two* kittens."

"Yep." Margot turns her attention back to the cage.

"How old do you think they are?"

"Hard to tell. Though looking at those two, I'd say they're about ready to move on. Can you reach them?"

"Yeah."

They don't come easily. I end up taking off my shirt to wrap them up tight enough to stop their sharp little claws from scratching the hell outta me.

"I might take lunch back," Pauly says. "I'll let them know you're on your way."

"Thanks."

He gives me a smile that seems almost genuine. "It's really no problem."

After helping Margot with the cats, I head to the station, a ball of dread clenched in my gut. I'm pretty sure Pauly wouldn't have said shit, but I can't be sure.

What I *do* know is that I need to be prepared for people to be fuckwits.

Roo is worth it. Just like he was in high school.

But the shit I went through back then got to me pretty hard.

I've gotta hope I'm ready for it this time.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR
ROO

The shrill sound of sirens makes me jolt. I sit up high enough in the booth to see a firetruck shoot past down O'Connell Road.

Fuck.

Every time Tanner mentions a fire or a lot of callouts, my stomach gets so tight, I might be sick. I hate this.

But I've got to suck it up.

My phone vibrates again with a call from Mom, and I hurry to silence it.

"So, Royce, maybe you could present the kids' dance awards for us?"

I do my best not to cringe. She's my *future mother-in-law*, after all. Jesus. "Ah ..." I try to pull my thoughts from the possible emergency and focus on the table of people I really could have done without meeting today. "I can't dance."

There's a round of chuckles. "You won't *be* dancing. You'll have a list, and you hand the awards out."

"Yeah, I'm not great with kids."

Joan turns to me sharply, and just when I'm sure I'm going to be hit with questioning about what *that* means, I'm saved by Piper bringing over our coffees.

"Royce," she says in a teasing tone. "I never thought I'd see you on a planning committee."

Joan laughs. "He's not entirely here by choice. But you know he and Tanner could never say no to each

other. I'm shamelessly exploiting it."

"Mmhmm. That's never changed."

"I doubt it ever will."

"Not if Royce stays, it won't. You should have seen poor Tanner's face when he heard Royce was leaving again."

My attention clicks back in. "What?"

"You were leaving?" Joan asks.

I was? I'm trying to work out where this has come from as Piper keeps talking.

"Summer heard you and Circus talking in the bar the other night."

It hits me all at once. I mentioned leaving if we didn't get together. Something twists in my gut as I look up at her. "And how the hell did Tanner find out?"

She shifts awkwardly.

"You told him? What, did you think that would get him to finally go on a date with you?" I'm being a bitch, and I don't really give a shit. My heart won't stop pounding.

"No, I *told* him so he'd finally get his shit together and tell you how he feels. And it worked, didn't it?"

"When did you tell him?"

She looks surprised by the question. "Ah, I don't know. A week or so ago? Right after you picked up your bed."

My bed. The one I've never used because the day we bought it was the day Tanner suddenly discovered all these feelings he has for me.

I bury my face in my hands.

He's always said he'll do anything to keep me here.

Please don't let doing *me* be "anything."

"Royce, are you okay?"

I force a smile for Joan even as I stand and leave the booth. “Totally fine. Just not feeling very well.” I tap my temple, and yeah, I’m using my seizures as an excuse to get out of this. It wouldn’t be the first time, because if I’ve got to deal with those assholes, they can at least be useful in awkward conversations.

Or at least, an awkward conversation with Joan. Instead, I’m going to head home and prepare for an awkward conversation with Tanner.

Because I know he’ll never admit it.

But I can always tell when he’s lying.

And if he’s lying about this, I’ll be gone by tomorrow.

It’ll be the thing that finally breaks me.

When I get home, there’s still hours until Tanner’s shift is done, and he doesn’t reply to my text, so there’s a good chance he’s still busy with whatever emergency was happening earlier. I can’t be mad. Not *yet* anyway.

That doesn’t stop me from feeling sick, though.

Dear God, I can’t sit still.

I’m working myself up to stupid levels over a massive leap my cynical brain won’t let me drop, but for fuck’s sake, what are the chances? I’ve been in love with him forever, and now, *now* he suddenly feels the same way?

I grab my laptop to distract myself and find a Post-it note stuck to the top.

A kangaroo is basically a T-rex with fur.

The fight leeches out of me, because no matter what, I can’t be pissed with Tanner for long. It’d be like kicking a puppy.

I open my laptop and idly click through house listings. There’s still sweet fuck all, but I flag another one that’s closer to Portland than I’d like.

My phone vibrates beside me with another call from Mom that I silence. She’s the last person I can talk to

right now. I'm sure all she wants is to check up on how things are going, and talking to her about Tanner when I don't have a solid answer is not how I want my afternoon to go.

I send her a quick text letting her know I'm busy and I'll call her another day. My phone immediately starts to ring again.

Swallowing back a groan, I answer.

"Well, I'm glad to know you're alive," Mom deadpans. And yep. She's definitely where I got some of my dry attitude from.

"Shouldn't my text have told you that?"

"You're funny."

I hum as I stand up and start to pace. Something about talking to Mom makes me feel like I need to be moving.

"Why have you been avoiding my calls?"

"I've been busy."

Her silence somehow manages to be skeptical.

"I was! Tanner's mom needed me to help with some shit for Sunflora."

Mom laughs. "You used to love that festival. How did you grow up so cynical?"

"I've *always* been cynical. I only loved it because it was another excuse to hang out with Tanner."

"Like you needed an excuse."

She's got me there. "Okay, are you calling for a reason, or just to tease me over my boyfriend?"

She bites off her automatic response, and I'd put money down that she was going to warn me about Tanner the way she has every time since senior year. Instead she says, "Well, thank God it's going well, because I have news for you."

"Which is?"

“Eric Fletcher has a property out on Darby Lane that’s been sitting there for years. It’s on a big lot, but it’s ... Well, *I* still think the whole place needs to be torn down. Anyway, after I got your text the other day, I’ve been trying to push him to sell it. He called earlier to say he goes out for maintenance once a month, and he’ll be there today if you want to meet him.”

I stop pacing. “Today?”

“Yes. That’s why I’ve been trying to call you.”

“How long will he be there for?”

“Maybe another hour or so.”

“Shit, okay, yeah.” I scrub my hand through my hair. “I’ll, I don’t know, I’ll sort something out. Thanks, Mom.”

“Of course, sweetie. Good luck.”

Yep, I’m going to need it.

I don’t have a driver’s license, and Darby’s Lane is a good ten minutes’ drive from here. I guess I could walk, but if Eric up and leaves early, I’ll miss him.

I try Circus, but he doesn’t answer, and as I scroll a little further down, I pause on Leon’s number. He’s probably working, but I try him anyway.

“Hey, Royce.”

“Oh, hey, I wasn’t actually expecting you to answer.”

“Yeah, just got off work.”

“See, I knew the building industry was full of slackers.”

His laugh is deep and warm. “So this call is a surprise ...”

I can’t blame him for seeming confused when we haven’t spoken since that disastrous trip to Port Welling.

“Yeah, sorry. I’ve got a bit of an urgent favor I was hoping you could help with ...”

When Leon shows up five minutes later, it goes a long way toward making me feel guilty for my lack of

effort in our friendship. He's gruff and thickset, which makes people kinda scared of him, but he's one of those guys who will go out of his way for his friends.

"So, what made Eric Fletcher think of selling? I've been at him for years."

"My mom."

"Ah ... she always was a bit scary. Even when we were kids."

"Trust me, nothing's changed."

Leon chuckles. "I've wanted that bit of land for years. Wish my mom had talked him into it."

"Nuh-uh." I point my finger at him in warning. "Don't even try and steal this from me. It's the only place close to town available. Tanner needs this."

"Don't worry, I wouldn't do that to Tanner. Besides, Eric would never sell to me anyway. He thinks I'm gonna put units on there." Leon throws me a bewildered look. "How many people does he think wanna live in Sunbury?"

"Man, you've got me."

Leon moves to turn the radio down. "What about you? If you're looking at buying this place, does that mean you're here to stay for good?"

Am I? I wish I could answer that question, but it's come a couple of hours too soon. Maybe once I talk to Tanner and find out why this is all happening now, and have him assure me, once and for all, that his feelings are real, then I'll know how to answer.

"I actually really hope so."

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE
TANNER

Urggg.

I'm sore. And achy. And things hurt all over.

It's been a busy day at the station, and all I've looked forward to all day is getting home to see Roo.

And he's not here.

I dump my bag as I walk into the empty living room. The apartment is quiet, and I don't like it. I've never lived on my own before because I need people around. Being by myself brings those bad, exhausted feelings forward.

I've already showered so I head to the kitchen to start dinner since it's getting late in the afternoon, and if I get it out of the way, I can have a relaxing night with Roo.

Just me and him and whatever shit he picks on TV.

I shoot him a text to say I'm home, then nudge his laptop out of the way to start pulling out ingredients for a stir-fry. Only when I move it, the screen lights up, and my attention catches on a real-estate site.

Sunbury is listed in the search bar, and my heart gives a little extra thump as I figure through what this means. Is Roo looking at staying? And is he looking at places for himself only ... or him *and* me?

I'm smiling hard.

It *has* to be for the both of us. I couldn't imagine him moving out, and I'd bet money he's the same.

There's a little red number next to his saved searches, and I know I probably shouldn't, but I click on it anyway.

It's not what I'm expecting.

My smile dissolves as I look at the areas listed. They're all close to Portland. It looks like we're moving, then.

When the hell was he going to tell *me*?

The front door creaks open, and I go to quickly close his laptop, then pause. There's no way I can get through the rest of the day pretending. It's not gonna happen. I'm way too exhausted for this conversation, but I'm also too tired to hide the anxiousness gripping me.

He rounds the corner and pulls up, looking surprised to see me. "You're home."

When he doesn't immediately step forward for a hug, I tense.

"Yeah ..." I say cautiously. Fuck it. I spin the laptop to face him. "What's this?"

His eyebrows bunch up in confusion. "House listings."

"Near Portland." My voice squeaks higher. "We're leaving?"

Roo drops his phone and wallet on the table before crossing the distance to the kitchen. "And would you be okay with that?"

"I told you I would be." I just wish he'd given me some kind of heads-up first.

"Tanner ..."

"Don't use that voice. Are we leaving? It's a pretty simple question."

"Is it?" He pulls that face where his eyes are all big and he looks kinda helpless. It never fails to make me wanna comfort him, but not this time. He sets his jaw. "That will depend on you."

“Me?”

“Obviously. I know what I want. I’ve known since we were in sophomore year. The thing is, I don’t think *you* do.”

“Excuse me?”

“Come *on*. I know you heard I was talking about leaving the exact same day you decided you were in love with me. Why, Tanner?”

I blink at him. “What are you trying to say?”

“Really?” He pins me with a look. “We both know where I’m going with this. Did you, or did you not, say that to keep me here?”

My mouth slowly drops. I can’t quite place the feeling that sweeps over me, but it’s heavy and gross and not a way I ever thought Roo would make me feel. “Are you ... Are you asking if I purposely manipulated you? Or if I’m so stupid that I did it by accident?”

He swallows thickly and glances away. “I—”

“Maybe I don’t wanna know,” I mumble.

“Tanner.” Roo snatches off his hat and drops it on the counter. “You know that’s not it.”

My back hits the pantry, and I sink to the floor. “You sure I know that? Sure I’m not too stupid to get it?”

“*Tanner.*”

“Or maybe I don’t wanna get it? Maybe I’m *that* much of a dick.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, it was a question.”

“A fucked-up question.”

I feel rather than see him step closer and kneel between my bent knees. “Look at me.”

“Don’t wanna right now.” Because when I look at him, my heart swells and my whole body is doused in all these happy feelings that make me smile.

Cold fingertips run down my cheek, and I force myself not to lean into them. Not to react. Because all I want is to pull him into my arms and keep him there forever, but the fact that he doubts how I feel, even for a second, really hurts. It might have taken me a minute to get to where he is, but I'd never try to trap him here with me. I'd never trick him.

"I've been struggling," he finally says. "Ever since we officially got together, I worried that *I'd* tricked you into it. That this was a desperate attempt to keep me here, and that you were just pushing what you really felt for me so *I* wasn't hurt."

I wanna be mad, but ... it sounds exactly like something I'd do.

"I love you so much, and for so long, I was worried I was only seeing what I wanted to see. And then when Piper mentioned she'd told you what Circus and I were talking about ..." Roo presses his forehead to my knee. "Tanner, I'm struggling. I've *always* struggled. I don't know what I ever did to deserve you as a friend, and I'm finding it so hard to believe this is real, that I'm convinced in a few months you're going to look around and wonder how the fuck we got here."

When he glances up again, his eyes are red. My heart squeezes at seeing him upset, and no matter how much I try to ignore it, I know I'll never be able to turn it off.

I cup his face. "You can always tell when I'm lying. Am I lying now?"

He studies me for a moment and slowly shakes his head.

"You don't need to deserve me. That's not what this is. All you have to do is trust me and love me, and I'll do the same right back." I lean forward to kiss him. "I will never regret this. I wish I could have told you sooner, but I had some stuff to figure out, I guess."

Roo finally relaxes. "I was looking at a house today."

It's my turn to go tense. "Where at?"

“Australia.”

“*What?*”

He bursts out laughing. “Okay, that was mean.” He presses a hard kiss to my cheek, and I’m only just calming down when he says, “Darby Lane.”

“D—as in, only a few miles from here?”

“Yes. All those houses I had saved were because there’s literally *nothing* in Sunbury. Mom’s been asking around, and she’s bullied Eric Fletcher into selling. To us.”

“*Us?*” Am I hearing this right?

“Well, you, truthfully. He seemed a bit pissed you didn’t show up with me. I believe his words were, ‘I want the property to stay with the town’s folks.’”

It’s my turn to laugh. “He doesn’t speak like that.”

Roo shrugs like he disagrees, but I don’t argue the point because ... “You wanna buy a house with me?”

“I want *everything* with you. Being with you is all I’ve imagined for so long, and the moment you said you’d leave Sunbury, I knew we weren’t going anywhere. I know what this town means to you. I know how much you love it here. And saying you’d leave, for me ... Yeah, that was the kick in the ass I needed to get my shit together. I have a job. We hopefully have a house. And now that I have you ...” His hazel eyes pierce mine. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The familiar warmth floods my chest, and hell, I don’t know how I ever confused it for something platonic. It’s consuming, and without Roo here, without these feelings, I’d been so fucking empty, no matter how I pretended otherwise.

I yank him close and suck his deliciously full bottom lip into my mouth. The feel of him against me is everything, and the idea that I could be getting all I’ve ever worked toward—my career, a house—and the one thing I need—Roo—has me floating.

I kiss him, deep and needy, ignoring the ache in my muscles. All I know is I need to be as close to him as possible.

“Fuck me,” Roo mutters against my lips.

“No.”

He pulls back, blinking through his surprise.

“I want you inside *me*.”

His eyes light up, and damn, I wish I’d asked for this sooner. I’m nervous as hell, but bringing that look to his face is worth it.

Roo jumps up and pulls me after him.

He’s so fucking addictive. As he leads the way, I crowd in behind him, unable to keep from touching him. My mouth finds his neck, and I breathe in the smell of his skin as I flick open the button on his jeans.

“Okay, okay.” We reach my room, and he laughs as he steps away from me. Turns. Then backs me toward the bed.

The stare he pins me with is so heavy with lust, my dick thickens from half hard to needing to be touched immediately.

The fact that it’s Roo makes it ten times better.

I grab his shirt and yank him against me. His mouth crashes into mine, and I figure if I keep kissing him, tasting him, concentrating on his tongue and how much it’s turning me on, then I won’t get a chance to be nervous.

Because I’m really damn nervous.

This is the sort of thing I’d never spared a moment to think about. Before Roo came back and my stupid body forced me to confront my feelings for him, I’d never considered being with another man.

And yet, it’s all been so easy.

Will it still be easy when he’s buried inside my ass?

The way my cock twitches makes me think yes.

Roo yanks off my T-shirt, then pushes me back onto the bed. I watch as he stands there, chest heaving, and slowly peels his long-sleeved T-shirt off too. A low groan rumbles in my chest at the sight of him. All lean muscle and flat stomach and beautiful freckled skin.

I swear no matter how many times we do this, I'll always regret not doing it sooner.

“C'mere, Roo.”

He crawls over the top of me, and I pull his warm torso down flush against mine. His lips move along my jaw to my neck, and I immediately arch my head back to give him more room. His mouth is magic as he works his way down my neck and over my chest. His kisses are sloppy, and his tongue circles around my nipple before sucking it into his mouth.

I grunt. “Fuck.”

“You nervous?” he murmurs as he finally leaves my nipple alone and starts to lick his way along my abs.

“A bit.”

“You still okay with this?”

“Definitely.”

He licks his way up the groove between my abs, then unleashes a smile that makes my heart stop. “Good.” He pops the button on my work pants open. “Take these off, then get on your hands and knees.”

I scramble to do what he says, and the fucking leg of my pants gets stuck. With a growl, Roo reaches over and yanks them off, then shoves me onto my front. I barely manage to push onto my knees before he covers my back and his mouth finds my ear. He nips the lobe.

“I am going to own you.”

I'm nodding before I get the words out. “You already do.”

He moans and runs a lube-covered hand between my ass cheeks, and I have *no idea* when he got the lube, but fuck me, it feels amazing.

“Who does this belong to?”

My eyes shoot open at his words, and I almost tremble. “You.”

He reaches around and gives my cock a solid pump. “And this?”

“Oh, fuck.” I fist the sheets. “You, Roo. Fucking you.” I scramble to find his free hand and clasp it to my chest. “This too. I’m yours. All of me.”

His fingers link through mine as he lets go of my dick and returns his hand to my ass. His slick fingers rub over my hole for a moment before he slowly starts to apply pressure.

The nerves kick in. I have no idea what to expect. Pain, maybe. *Probably*. I don’t realize how tense I am until the pressure eases.

“Relax, Tanner. Relax this sexy hole for me.”

His deep voice is so full of lust, it makes relaxing easy.

“Yes, exactly like that. You’re doing so good.”

Oh. Okay, I like that. Apparently making Roo happy turns me on as well. I clench my grip on his hand tighter as his finger fills my ass. There’s a bit of a sting to start with, but it doesn’t last long, and then ...

“More.” Oh yeah, I need more.

And he gives me exactly what I need. More stretching, more fingers, more sucking on my neck, and more of that filthy praise that’s making my cock leak.

Then it all disappears.

“Wha—”

Roo sits back against the headboard and pats his thighs. “Get that sexy ass over here now.”

“So bossy.”

He very obviously looks at my dick. “Someone seems to like it.”

“Fuck yes, I do.” Because this display of dominance has me maybe harder than I’ve ever been in my life.

Roo grabs the lube bottle from the bed and pours a generous amount into his hand before slicking it over his erection.

My heart is going a bit mad because he’s definitely longer and wider than the fingers he had inside me, and I’d be lying if I said the nerves had completely left. But I take a deep breath and straddle Roo’s lap—not like my cock would let me do anything else at this point.

He pulls me down for a kiss. “I thought this would be better for your first time. This way you control the speed, and when you’re ready, just let me know.” That filthy smile is back.

Roo lines his dick up with my hole, and I guess this is it. It can’t happen fast enough.

Except apparently it can, because I try to rush it and a world of oh-holy-no type of pain shoots through me.

“Slower.” His tone doesn’t give me room to argue.

So I do what he says, and when he starts to lightly jerk me off, it distracts me from the pain.

I can do this, damn it.

And *wow*, the feel of him entering me, bare, is nothing short of incredible. A burst of pride hits me when I feel his hips against my ass.

“Yes ...” Roo breathes. He reaches around, and his fingers brush my hole as he feels where I’m stretched around him. “Yes. Fuck, yes.”

His face is only a few inches below mine, so I reach down and kiss him slow and deep while I adjust.

“I think I’m okay,” I say.

Roo bites my lip. “You sure? Because I’m going to fuck you so hard, you won’t be able to walk tomorrow.”

“Good thing it’s my day off, then.”

He gives a small thrust. “My hole.”

“You have a filthy mouth during sex.”

“Only when I top.” His fingers dig into my hips. “And only when the man of my Goddamn dreams is using my cock to get himself off.”

“So I’m gonna see this side of you again?” Because excuse me, I’ve found my newest addiction.

“Whenever you want for the rest of our lives.”

I groan and start to move.

Roo gives a deep thrust under me, and sparks race up my spine. “*Nrgh*, that. Again.”

He speeds up, the hands at my hips bringing me down to meet each thrust, and it doesn’t take me long to lose track of what’s happening. It’s all intense pleasure, and the smell of peaches and sweat, heavy breathing and grunts and a warm, hard body under mine.

“You’re taking my cock so good. Mine. All mine.”

And he might not mean it in the literal, creepy way, but he’ll never understand how true those words are. I’ve always been his.

Only this time, I get to keep him.

His hand wraps around my cock, and my hips take on a mind of their own. I’m completely blissed out as I chase the high of my orgasm. It builds at the base of my spine, and when I open my eyes and meet Roo’s, I’m right on the edge.

“Come. Now.”

Fuck. Like that’s what I’ve been waiting for, my cock twitches, unloading cum onto his stomach and hand. He thrusts upward once, twice, and then his head arches back as his cock starts to pulse inside me.

“Holy fuck,” he pants as he wraps his arms around me.

I couldn’t agree more. That was ... definitely not what I was expecting it to be.

“You okay?” Roo asks when he finally seems to have caught his breath.

“Very. Now when can we do that again?”

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX
R O O

“She’s right, it’s next level.”

Circus hums and shakes the hair back from his eyes. “It gets bigger every year.”

The whole of O’Connell Road is lined with vendors and little pop-up tents, and strings of bunting and flowers are spread overhead between the shopfronts. I have to give it to the committee, it really is something.

Sunbury has always been a backwoods kind of place in my mind. A place where you only stay if you can’t get out. A place where I’ll never fit in.

But as each person walks past and gives me a friendly hello, I can feel myself growing warmer toward the place I always wanted to be free of.

“I’m going to head off,” I tell Circus.

He’s hired a shopfront to display a whole range of photos he’s taken. And he’s actually really fucking good. Most of the work is of Sunbury and Crown Trails, but there are a few models in there too. He’s still evasive about what he does for work, but I guess this is part of it.

“Yeah, all good. I’ll catch up with you guys for drinks later.”

“Not like there’s anything else to do in this town.” And yet, that doesn’t seem like the bad thing it once did.

He lets out a gravelly chuckle that immediately cuts off. “What the f—”

I turn and follow his line of sight to see Rowan Harvey.

“When did he get back?”

“Umm ... a week or so ago, I think?”

I turn back in time to see Circus’s nostrils flare.

“You okay?”

“Totally fine.”

The clenched jaw makes me think otherwise. “I’m supposed to meet Tanner now, but if you need me to stay ...”

“Nope, it’s fine. Go. Have fun.”

I leave, but I do it reluctantly. I’m not really sure what’s going on there. All I know is that Circus and Rowan used to be friends, and now they’re clearly not.

As I walk down O’Connell Road toward the fire station, I reach up to fix my hair. Awkwardly trying to cover my scar isn’t a habit I think I’ll ever shake.

The fire station is on the last block, right before the show ground, where there’s a huge floral and agricultural display going on. Spring is officially here, and Sunbury is packed with visitors.

As I approach, Tanner is the first person I see. All big and blond as he helps some kid down from the cab of the firetruck. I watch him give the kid a high five, hating the way it turns me all gooey inside.

“Want to give me a boost?” I ask as soon as the kid runs off.

Tanner’s face breaks into a smile. “Sorry, I’m officially off duty.”

“But I wanted a ride in the firetruck.”

He leans in close to my ear. “What if I promise you can ride a *fireman* later?”

I laugh. “Will you let me slide down his pole?”

“I’ll even let you ...” He scrunches up his face. “I was gonna say something about a hose, but now it sounds creepy rather than sexy.”

“Maybe I can put out your fire?”

“*Oooh*, there we go.”

He chuckles as he steps forward and wraps his arms around my waist. I immediately tense and look around. “Ah, Tanner. Have you actually told anyone here about us?”

“Nope.”

“Then—”

“I’m not gonna. They’ll all find out eventually, but I’m not turning it into some big coming-out thing. Most people have guessed and think we’re idiots for announcing it, and other people will be surprised, but it’s really none of their business.”

I chew the inside of my cheek. “And if some of them are dicks about it?”

“Chief has already said he’ll keep an eye out.”

“Well, okay, then.”

“Okay.” He leans in and presses a sweet kiss to my lips. No one dies. The world continues. Huzzah. “Come on, I told her we’d be there by one.”

“Who?”

“You’ll see.”

Tanner’s like a giant, excitable puppy as he tugs me back in the direction I’ve just come. I hate surprises, but with the way he’s practically shaking as he pulls me along, I’m not about to ruin this one for him.

“How did Circus do? Sell lots again?”

I roll my eyes. “He did. People really love this town.”

“I swear all Mom has at home are his photos of random things around Sunbury.”

“What are we ...” I look up at the vet’s clinic and cock an eyebrow at Tanner. “My spidey senses are tingling.”

“Come on.” He grabs my hand and leads me inside.

I refuse to get excited. My stupid body doesn’t listen.

“I remember very early on that my roommate mentioned he wanted a cat.”

My stomach flips over. “No ...”

“You know that stray that’s been hanging around?”

“The ginger one?”

“Yup. She got hurt last week, and I helped Margot bring her and her two kittens here. Originally I wanted to see if we’d be able to rehome her, but she’s too antisocial. Her kittens, though ...”

Tanner walks through the door into a back hall like he owns the place, and Margot pops her head out of a room and calls us down.

“Wait. I’m getting a kitten?”

“Aw, look how excited you are.”

“You said no to a pet.”

“I did. Because I work all the time and I had no idea if you’d be sticking around. But since you’ve decided to stay here, and with any luck I’ll be able to work just one job, plus us maybe getting our own place ...” Tanner stops in the doorway and turns to me. “I didn’t actually think about it at all, and then I saw this little guy and he kinda reminded me of you.”

I cock my head. “Is he an asshole cat?”

Tanner laughs. “Come see.”

Margot shows us to one of the cages set in the wall, where two kittens are playing. One is completely ginger, like the stray that’s always around, and the other is ... I guess tortoiseshell is the best descriptor. It’s speckled with different browns and black and ginger. There’s no pattern; it’s ... a mess.

I’m in love immediately.

Warm breath hits my ear as Tanner leans in. “Reminded me of your freckles.”

God, my heart. “Can I hold her?”

“Of course.” Margot opens the cage, so I reach inside and pick her up.

Damn, she’s fluffy. And teeny. And soft.

Yup, definitely in love here. I snuggle my face into her fur as the kitten swipes at my nose and gives me a grumpy look.

I can’t hold back my smile. “Can we keep her?”

Tanner sighs. “I’ve lost you to a cat, haven’t I?”

“One hundred percent.”

He exchanges a look with Margot, who laughs. “I *hope* you’re keeping her. Tanner already paid for the microchip and spaying.”

“You bought me a cat?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He grabs a carrier and plonks it on the metal table in the middle of the room. “Ready to take her home?”

I settle the kitten into the carrier as the one behind me lets out a pathetic little *meow*.

Uh-oh. I turn back to see big hazel eyes watching me curiously. I stare at it. It stares back.

I turn to Tanner.

“No.”

“But—”

“Definitely not.”

“Ta-*nner*.” I draw out his name and push my bottom lip out as far as it will go. “We can’t separate them.”

“We can, though.” He closes the door on the cat carrier but doesn’t make a move to go.

The kitten meows again. It’s like the bastard is *trying* to make me feel bad.

“Roo ...”

“My heart is breaking.”

“So fucking dramatic.” He hangs his head back with a groan. “I’ll learn to say no. One day, I swear to God, I’ll learn to say no.”

“You are *such* a pushover,” Margot teases as she opens the cage door again.

I eagerly scoop up the ginger cat and hold it close. “Hands down, best day of my life.”

“I thought us getting together was the best day of your life?”

“Didn’t we just cover this? You’ve been replaced. Now you’re *third* in my heart.”

He gives me a dry look as he swings the door open again, and I reunite the ginger with its sister.

“As long as I’m still the first *human*, I think I’ll survive.”

Tanner picks up the cats, and we follow Margot back out front, where we pay for the second one and leave. I wind my arm around Tanner’s waist as soon as we’re in the street, and he wraps a big arm around my shoulders.

“You really *do* love me,” I tease.

“Just so you know, that look you gave me won’t work on everything.”

“Past experience says otherwise.”

“I can say no.”

“Sure you can, sweetie.” I pat his chest.

“Hey, Tanner. Royce.” Ms. Rasserman nods at the carrier. “What you got in there?”

“A bear cub,” I answer with a straight face, and her mouth drops.

Tanner shakes his head. “It’s kittens.”

Ms. Rasserman gives me an exasperated look before sending an indulgent smile Tanner’s way. “It’s already at the getting-pets-together stage, is it?”

“I guess it is.”

We keep walking, and I start to laugh. “You realize everyone in town will find out we have pets together before we’re even back home.”

“Good. Then everyone will know.”

“That we’re dating?”

“That we’re serious.” He kisses my head. “And you’re mine.”

I grin up at him. “You know, some people would think we’re weird for talking like that.”

“Then they don’t have what we have. And in that case, I feel sorry for them.”

I do too. Because I know what it’s like to live without Tanner, and it’s not something I want to go through again. We haven’t talked about marriage or any of that shit, because I don’t think it’s something I’m all that keen on. All that matters is that I have him. Forever.

And I’m the luckiest asshole in the world that he feels the same way.



EPILOGUE
TANNER

Two Months Later

I'm shitting bricks. Chief calls out for me to enter, and I have to scrub my sweaty palms on the front of my pants before I grab the handle and open the door.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Tanner. Take a seat."

His face gives nothing away. Fuck. The test was yesterday. Would they really have gone through them all already?

I clear my throat as I slide the chair out and drop into it. Chief's stare is heavy, unblinking. He slides the test across the desk.

I know he wants me to take it, but I physically can't. This is the very last position open for a year at least, and if I haven't got it this time ...

"Congratulations."

"*What?*" I shoot to the edge of the chair and snatch the test up. Eighty-one percent. "Do—does this mean ..." The rest of my question won't come.

"The position is yours if you want it."

"Shit." My head drops into my hands as I try to keep myself steady. "Yes. Hell yes, please."

Chief Lawson laughs at my enthusiasm before he calms and gives me a smile. "I'm glad to finally have you on board, Tanner. You're going to give the rest of the guys a real kick up the ass."

“I’ll definitely try.”

“And how are you doing with them? Any issues?”

It was weird at first. A few awkward moments, and some people are clearly a bit uncomfortable, but mostly they’ve all been the same as before.

“Everything’s great.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” We shake hands. “Let me know if you need anything or have any questions. You can come in on Monday to sign the paperwork.”

I walk out of the station like I could fucking fly, and then I swing by the apartment to pick up Roo.

As I pull up in the parking lot, he jogs to the car, waving a set of keys at me.

“Here they are,” he says as he jumps into the passenger seat.

We share a goofy smile. “We’re officially homeowners?”

He snorts. “I wouldn’t really call it a home.”

“Yet.”

“Yet.”

It takes ten minutes to drive out to Darby Lane, and I have to admit that Circus has the right idea living outside of town. We’re far enough here that I don’t feel like we’ll be living right on top of everyone else, but still close enough that we can stumble home together after way too many drinks.

“So ... I spoke to the chief before I left.”

“Oh my God.” Roo spins to look at me. “And?”

My relieved smile is impossible to hold back. “I got it.”

“Tanner! Jesus.” He squeezes my thigh. “You did it.”

“I did. Thanks to you.”

“Nope. All thanks to you.” He links his fingers through mine and lifts my hand to his lips. “I’m so proud

of you.”

My heart could burst.

I steer the truck down the long drive and pull up in front of the house.

It’s ... a shithole.

I’m not totally convinced the whole thing doesn’t need to be pulled down, but Leon assured us it has *good bones*.

Roo jumps out of the truck, and we climb the front steps and cross the porch. He hands me the keys. I swear we both hold our breath as I unlock the house, then before Roo can take a step, I duck down and scoop him up into my arms.

“Please tell me you’re not going to carry me over the threshold.”

“Well, you won’t let me marry you, so this is the next best thing.”

“I said I would if you wanted to.”

I step into the house but don’t put him down. His hair has grown out longer, and I take a moment to study his face before coming to rest at the scar in front of his ear. “I don’t want to anymore.”

“You don’t?”

“Nope. It won’t make you happy. So instead, I’ll keep buying you cats, and houses for us to work on, and popcorn for you to hog. And you can keep getting up early for me, and coming on morning jogs into town”—Roo groans—“because we love each other.”

Roo wraps his hands around my neck as I put him down again. “We love each other. And our little Flame and Freckle.”

My lips twitch. “Yes, we love them too.”

He kisses me once, then pulls back, and we look around at the mess. Molding old carpet, chipped wooden panels, peeling ceiling paint.

“Well,” I say, “let’s get started so we can get home to our babies.”

“You know, it’s lucky we have forever.” Roo gives me a cheeky smile. “It looks like we’re going to need it.”

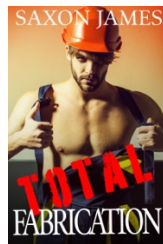
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